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SALAR

DIGITAL ENGLISH DAILY, BENGALURU

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PHOTO: PTI

Russian officials hand over Navalny's body to his mom

MOSCOW, 24 FEB

The body of Russian opposition leader Alexei Navalny has been handed over to his mother, a top aide to Navalny said Saturday on his social media account. van Zhdanov, the director of Navalny's Anti-Corruption Foundation, made the announcement on his Telegram account and thanked "everyone" who had called on Russian authorities to return Navalny's body to his mother Earlier Saturday, Yulia Navalnaya, Navalny's widow, accused President Vladimir Putin of mocking Christianity by trying to force his mother to agree to a secret funeral after his death in an Arctic penal colony. Navalny, 47, Russia's most well-known Opposition politician, unexpectedly died on 16 February in an Arctic penal colony. *—PTI*

1 killed in blast near Imphal University

IMPHAL, 24 FEB

One person was killed and another injured in an improvised explosive device (IED) explosion in Manipur's Imphal West district, police said on Saturday.The incident took place at DM College complex on Friday night.A 24-year-old man, identified as Oinam Kenegy, succumbed to his injuries at a hospital, a police officer said.The other injured person is undergoing treatment at a hospital and his condition is stated to be serious.No outfit has claimed responsibility for the blast so far. Meanwhile, unidentified persons torched the office of a civil society organisation, United Committee Manipur (UCM), at Lamphelpat in Imphal West district. *—PTI*

EC tweaks policy on officers' transfer to plug loopholes

NEW DELHI, 24 FEB

Election Commission has asked states to ensure that officers who are transferred out of a district ahead of polls as part of its policy are not posted in any district within the same parliamentary constituency. By tweaking its policy on transferring officers ahead of elections, the EC has sought to plug loopholes being exploited by state governments. The move comes after the poll authority took "serious note" of cases in which officers were being transferred in adjacent districts within the same parliamentary constituency by state governments. *—PTI*

Haryana extends internet ban amid farmers protest

CHANDIGARH, 24 FEB

The Haryana government has further extended the suspension of mobile internet and bulk SMS services in seven districts by a day till Saturday in the wake of the ongoing farmers' 'Delhi Chalo' agitation, according to an official order. Mobile internet and bulk SMS services were first suspended in Ambala, Kurukshetra, Kaithal, Jind, Hisar, Fatehabad and Sirsa on 11 February and the suspension was extended on 13, 15, 17, 19, 20 and 21 February. *—PTI*

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New criminal laws to come into effect from 1 July

However, law on hit & run by drivers will not be implemented

NEW DELHI, 24 FEB

The newly enacted laws -- Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita, Bharatiya Nagarik Suraksha Sanhita and Bharatiya Sakshya Act -- to completely overhaul the criminal justice system in the country will come into effect from 1 July.

However, the provision related to cases of hit and run by vehicle drivers will not be implemented immediately.

The three laws got the Parliament's approval on 21 December last year and President Droupadi Murmu gave her assent on 25 December.

According to three identical notifications issued by the Union home ministry, provisions of the new laws will come into force from 1 July.

The laws will replace the colonial-era Indian Penal Code, the Code of Criminal Procedure and the Indian Evidence Act of 1872 respectively.

Home Minister Amit Shah had said the focus was on delivering justice rather than handing down the punishment *PHOTO: PTI*

The three legislations aim at completely overhauling the criminal justice system in the country by giving definitions of various offences and their punishments.

The government, however, has decided not to implement the provision related to cases of hit and run by a vehicle driver as promised to truckers who had protested against it.

After the laws were enacted the truckers had protested the provision of Section 106 (2) which provides for 10 years imprisonment and fine to those who causes death of any person by rash and negligent driving of vehicle not amounting to culpable homicide, and escapes without reporting it to a police officer.

Union Home Secretary Ajay Bhalla had said the decision to invoke Section 106 (2) of the Bharatiya Nyay Sanhita will be taken only after consultation with the All India Motor Transport Congress.

While replying to a debate on the three bills in Parliament, Union Home Minister Amit Shah had said the focus was on delivering justice rather than handing down the punishment.

For the first time, the word terrorism has been defined in the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita. It was absent in the IPC.

The Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita lists offences such as acts of secession, armed rebellion, subversive activities, separatist activities or endangering the sovereignty or unity in the new avatar of the sedition law.

According to the laws, anyone purposely or knowingly, by words, either spoken or written, or by signs, or by visible representation, or by electronic communication or by use of financial means, or otherwise, excites or attempts to excite secession or armed rebellion or subversive activities, or encourages feelings of separatist activities or endangers sovereignty or unity and integrity of India or indulges in or commits any such act shall be punished with imprisonment for life or with imprisonment which may extend to seven years and shall also be liable to fine. *—PTI*

24 die as tractor falls into pond in UP

KASGANJ , 24 FEB

As many as 24 people, including eight children, died when their tractor-trolley overturned and fell into a pond in Uttar Pradesh's Kasganj district on Saturday morning, officials said.

Earlier, Inspector General of Aligarh range Shalabh Mathur had said that 24 passengers died in the accident and 15 to 20 people were injured.

However later, Relief Commission of Uttar Pradesh Naveen Kumar GS, citing a statement of Kasganj Additional District Magistrate Rakesh Kumar Patel, said, "Twenty-two people died when the tractor-trolley overturned and fell into a pond."

"The deceased include 13 women, a man and eight children. Ten people are currently undergoing treatment," the statement said.

The Kasganj district administration said that Rs 4 lakh will be provided to the kin of each of the deceased, while Rs 50,000 will be provided to each of the injured persons.

President Droupadi Murmu, Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath have condoled the loss of lives in the incident.

Modi also said that Rs 2 lakh ex gratia from the Prime Minister's National Relief Fund would be given to the next of kin of each deceased. *—PTI*

6 KILLED IN K'TAKA ROAD ACCIDENT

BELAGAVI, 24 FEB

Six people died in a road accident at Datt Jamboti Road, about 90km from here, police said on Saturday. While five people died on the spot in the mishap which occurred on Friday, another succumbed to the injuries in hospital, they said. The accident took place when a car hit a parked two-wheeler and another two-wheeler subsequently as the driver lost control of the vehicle. Two people who were standing near the parked vehicle sustained severe injuries and were admitted to hospital. The deceased are Eknath Padtari,22; Mallikarjun Marathe ,16; Akash Marathe,14; Laxmi Ramappa Marathe 19; and Nagapa Laxman Yadavannavar, 48. *—Salar News*

AHEAD OF UCC

Assam Cabinet gives nod to repeal Muslim Marriage Act

GUWAHATI, 24 FEB

Assam Cabinet has given its nod to repeal Assam Muslim Marriages and Divorces Registration Act, 1935, in a bid to end child marriage, Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma said.

"This Act contained provisions allowing marriage registration even if the bride and groom had not reached the legal ages of 18 and 21 respectively, as required by law," the chief minister posted on X.

Opposition parties, however, termed the decision "discriminatory against Muslims" and "attempt to polarise voters in an election year". Congress MLA Abdul Rashid Mandal alleged that by taking a decision to repeal the Act in the year of Lok Saha polls, the government is doing a "discriminatory decision against Muslims".

"The government talks about Uniform Civil Code (UCC) and banning polygamy in the state but no such Bill or ordinance has been brought in the assembly so far for reasons best known to them," the Goalpara (West) MLA added. "The BJP government is calling it (Assam Muslim Marriages and Divorces Registration Act, 1935) an obsolete Act and that registration of child marriages is happening under it, but that is not a fact. This is the only mechanism for registration of marriages and divorce for Muslims and is valid under the Constitution," he said.

The CM said the district commissioners and district registrars will be authorised to take "custody of registration records" currently with 94 Muslim Marriage Registrars on the repeal of the legislation under overall supervision and control of Assam Inspector General of Registration. A one-time compensation of Rs 2 lakh will be provided to Muslim Marriage Registrars for their rehabilitation after the Act is repealed.

The decision to repeal the Act was taken at a late-night cabinet meeting on Friday. *—PTI*

The decision to repeal the Act was taken at a late-night cabinet meeting on Friday *PHOTO: PTI*

Modi launches world's largest grain storage plan

NEW DELHI, 24 FEB

Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Saturday launched the world's largest grain storage plan in the cooperative sector, entailing an investment of over Rs 1.25 lakh crore, with the inauguration of 11 godowns in primary agricultural credit societies (PACS) in as many states.

Under the programme, 700 lakh tonne of storage capacity will be created over the next five years in the cooperative sector by constructing thousands of godowns and warehouses, Modi said at an event here.

He also laid the foundation for creating godowns and other agri infrastructure in 500 more PACS.

"Today we have launched the world's largest storage scheme for our farmers. Under this, thousands of warehouses and godowns will be constructed across the country," he said after inaugurating 11 godowns set up by 11 PACS across 11 states.

Narendra Modi *PHOTO: PTI*

"Previous governments never paid due attention to this problem. But today through PACS, this problem is being addressed. Under the world's largest food grain storage programme, 700 lakh tonne storage capacity will be created in the next five years. On this initiative more than Rs 1.25 lakh crore will be spent," the Prime Minister said. *—PTI*

ASSETS WORTH RS 127 CR

'36% RS candidates have criminal cases against them'

NEW DELHI, 24 FEB

Thirty-six per cent of Rajya Sabha candidates have declared criminal cases against themselves while the average assets of candidates analysed stood at Rs 127.81 crore, according to poll rights body Association for Democratic Reforms (ADR).

ADR and the National Election Watch analysed the self-sworn affidavits of 58 out of the 59 candidates in the fray for 56 seats in 15 states. Rajya Sabha polls are scheduled for 27 February.

Congress candidate from Karnataka GC Chandrashekar was omitted from the analysis due to poorly scanned documents.

Additionally, 17 per cent of these individuals face serious criminal charges with one candidate having cases related to attempted murder.

ADR analysed the self-sworn affidavits of 58 out of the 59 candidates in the fray for 56 seats in 15 states. *PHOTO: PTI*

According to the analysis, eight (27 per cent) out of 30 BJP candidates, six (67 per cent) out of nine Congress candidates, one (25 per cent) out of four TMC candidates, two (67 per cent) out of three SP candidates, one (33 per cent) out of three YSRCP candidates, one (50 per cent) out of two RJD nominees, one (50 per cent) out of two BJD candidates, and one (100 per cent) BRS candidate have declared criminal cases against themselves in their affidavits. Moreover, the analysis delved into the financial backgrounds of the candidates.

- Congress candidate from Karnataka GC Chandrashekar was omitted from the analysis due to poorly scanned documents. Additionally, 17 per cent of these individuals face serious criminal charges with one candidate having cases related to attempted murder.

Approximately 21 per cent of the candidates are billionaires, boasting of assets exceeding Rs 100 crore. The average assets of Rajya Sabha candidates stand at Rs 127.81 crore. Congress nominee from Himachal Pradesh Abhishek Manu Singhvi with assets worth Rs 1,872 crore, Samajwadi Party nominee from Uttar Pradesh Jaya Amitabh Bachchan with assets worth Rs 1,578 crore and JD(S) nominee from Karnataka Kupendra Reddy with assets amounting to Rs 871 crore are among the top three weathiest candidates.

Among the poorest candidates are BJP's Madhya Pradesh candidate Balyogi Umesh Nath with assets worth over Rs 47 lakh, BJP's West Bengal candidate Samik Bhattacharya with assets worth Rs 1 crore and BJP's Uttar Pradesh candidate Sangita with assets worth Rs 1 crore. While 17 per cent of the candidates have educational qualifications ranging from 5th pass to 12th pass, a significant 79 per cent hold graduate or higher degrees. *—PTI*

RELIEF TO INDIA BLOC

AAP, Cong seal seat deal for Goa Delhi, Guj, H'yana

Congress will contest both the Lok Sabha seats in Goa and the lone seat in Chandigarh *PHOTO: PTI*

NEW DELHI, 24 FEB

Aam Aadmi Party will contest four Lok Sabha seats in Delhi and Congress three, the two constituents of the INDIA bloc said on Saturday as they announced their seat-sharing for the national capital, Gujarat, Goa and Haryana.

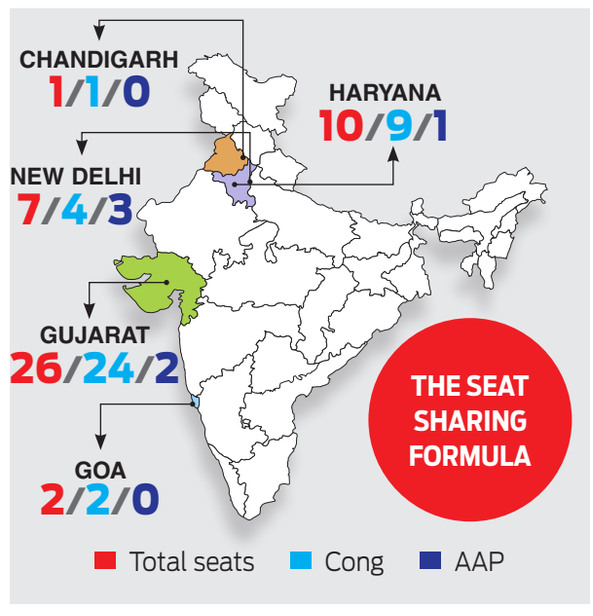
AAP General Secretary (organisation) Sandeep Pathak said his party entered into an alliance with the Congress by sidelining its own political interests as it believes that the "country is important and the party secondary". BJP termed the Congress-AAP tie-up as an alliance of the "corrupt", asserting that neither chemistry nor arithmetic favours the two parties against the NDA.

In a joint press conference here on Saturday, Congress leader Mukul Wasnik announced AAP will contest the Lok Sabha seats of New Delhi, West Delhi, South Delhi and East Delhi while his party will fight in Chandni Chowk, northeast Delhi and northwest Delhi seats. BJP won all seven Lok Sabha seats in Delhi in the 2014 and 2019 General Elections.

According to the seat-sharing arrangement, AAP will contest Bharuch and Bhavnagar seats in Gujarat while Congress will field candidates on the remaining 24. Congress will contest both the Lok Sabha seats in Goa and the lone seat in Chandigarh, Wasnik said. In Haryana, the Congress will contest nine of the 10 Lok Sabha seats while the AAP will field its candidate in Kurukshetra, Wasnik said.

He said given the "special circumstances" that exist in Punjab, the AAP and the Congress have decided to fight the Lok Sabha polls separately in the state.

About Gujarat's Bharuch, where late Congress leader Ahmed Patel hailed from, Wasnik hoped that all Congress workers would respect the decision to give the seat to AAP. The decision did not go down well with Faisal Patel and Mumtaz Patel, the son and daughter of Ahmed Patel, who had won from the Bharuch seat three times in 1970s and 1980s. Faisal said Congress workers were not happy with the decision, but added that he would abide by the decision of the Congress high command. *—PTI*



BJP factions fight for ticket in Udupi C'magaluru seat

C'MAGALURU, 24 FEB

With Lok Sabha Elections around the corner, the battle between two factions of BJP for tickets in Udupi Chikkamagaluru constituency has reached a fever pitch. The factions supporting current MP and Union Minister Shobha Karandlaje and former MLA CT Ravi have started lobbying for the tickets.The group opposing Karandlaje's candidature has allegedly launched a campaign called 'Shobha Hatao BJP Bachao', which is a continuation of earlier campaigns such as 'Patra Abhiyan' and 'Go Back Shobha Abhiyan'. They questioned the efficacy of an MP who reportedly spent only 100 out of 3,583 days in the constituency. Allegations on the distribution of grants have added to the discontent towards the Union Minister. Social media posts highlighted the purported absence of grants to Tarikere and Ajjampur taluks from 2019 to 2024.Amid this discontent, a group of workers have petitioned BJP leaders, including Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Home Minister Amit Shah, advocating for Ravi to be granted a ticket for the upcoming elections. Similar sentiments against incumbent MPs also surfaced in neighbouring Dakshina Kannada constituency against MP Nalin Kumar Kateel and in Uttara Kannada seat against MP Ananthakumar Hegde. *—Salar News*

Water scarcity looms over Mysuru City

MYSURU, 24 FEB

With the onset of summer, parts of Mysuru city have started experiencing water scarcity, with some areas receiving drinking water only once every two days. Despite the presence of Cauvery and Kapila rivers, the water levels in reservoirs such as Kabini and KRS are diminishing. Water ATMs have witnessed more demand and long queues can be seen in many of them in the City. Kaveri Nagar, Aishwarya Nagar, Nyayanga Barangay, and Ravi Shankar layouts depend on borewell water. Kuvempunagar, Metagalli and BM Sree Nagar are receiving water for only two hours each day. With a population of 13.50 lakhs, the city requires around 3.5 TMC (thousand million cubic feet) of water annually. Presently, 60 MLD of water is allocated to 48 villages, industries, and Muda layouts, including Rammanahalli on the city's outskirts. Deputy Commissioner KV Rajendra said water supply needs until May can be met and rainfall in June would alleviate the situation.*—Salar News*

5 held for looting Rs 5 lakh cash, gold from farmhouse

C'MAGALURU, 24 FEB

Five men were arrested on charges of assaulting residents of a farmhouse at Hosalli village in Mudigere taluk and looting Rs 5.25 lakh in cash and gold ornaments valued at Rs 1.25 lakh. The robbery took place at the residence of Anantaram Hebbar on 15 February. The gang sprinkled chilly powder on the victims and decamped with cash and jewels. They inflicted injuries on a worker named Srinivasa Murthy and damaged properties.A case was registered at Balur police station invoking IPC sections 395, 397, 427, and 450. The arrested are Ansar Alias Anchu from Bantwala, Qalandar Alias Mohammed Gaus from Belthangadi, Shining Kumar Alias Shaini from Bettadamane village in Mudigere Taluk, Ashraf Alias Hasarab from Anjoor village and Umesh from Jannapur village. While Anchu was apprehended by locals while attempting to flee, the other suspects were nabbed after a coordinated police operation. Investigations revealed that Shining Kumar, a coffee trader from Bettadamane, had orchestrated the robbery after identifying Hebbar's home as a target. —Salar News

Guarantees to continue in our next term also: DKS

There should be religion in politics not politics in religion: Shivakumar

BENGALURU, 24 FEB

The guarantee schemes launched by Congress will continue to its next term as well, said Deputy Chief Minister DK Shivakumar at a conference of guarantee schemes' beneficiaries in Shivamogga on Saturday.

"I am promising the youth, farmers and women who have gathered today that Congress will never stop guarantee schemes," he said.

Responding to BJP leaders' accusations that Congress will stop guarantee schemes after Lok Sabha polls, he said, "Whatever the BJP leaders say is a lie. Your Congress government will be in power not only for the next four years but for nine years including the next five years."

Deputy Chief Minister DK Shivakumar ***PHOTO: SALAR***

> **I am promising the youth, farmers and women who have gathered today that Congress will never stop guarantee schemes. Whatever BJP leaders say is a lie. Your Congress govt will be in power not only for next four years but for nine years**
>
> -DK Shivakumar, Deputy Chief Minister

Shivakumar said BJP does politics based on emotions whereas Congress does politics based on the needs of the people. "This is the difference between BJP and us," he added.

About the Ram Mandir inauguration in Ayodhya, Shivakumar said the temple is nobody's property. "A temple is a place where business takes place between the devotee and the Lord. BJP is getting publicity on Ram Mandir issue. It was Rajiv Gandhi who first allowed worship in Ayodhya," the Deputy Chief Minister said.

"There should be religion in politics not politics in religion. Our five guarantee schemes are not given based on caste and are given based on policy. The schemes do not belong to one class of people. Whenever the Congress government came to power, it made a programme for all classes of people," he said.

Karnataka Hindu Religious Institutions and Charitable Endowments (Amendment) Bill, 2024, which sought to collect funds from temples with over Rs 10 lakh annual income was defeated by Opposition in Legislative Council on Friday. Shivakumar said the bill will be passed when Congress achieves a majority in the Council in three months.

"We intended to take 10 per cent of the revenue of bigger temple to provide insurance and education to the children of priests. BJP and JD(S) leaders who do politics based on religion did not pass the bill," the KPCC President said.

—Salar News

TEMPLE BILL DEFEAT

BJP spreading misinformation: Siddaramaiah

HASSAN, 24 FEB

Chief Minister Siddaramaiah on Saturday blamed the Opposition, especially BJP, for the defeat of a bill to tax Hindu temples in the Legislative Council and accused the saffron party of spreading "misinforamtion" about it.

Karnataka Hindu Religious Institutions and Charitable Endowments (Amendment) Bill, 2024 which was passed by the Legislative Assembly earlier this week, was defeated by a voice vote in the Upper House, where the opposition has a majority, on Friday.

"There was nothing in it, they have done it intentionally. They are indulging in misinformation. The bill was to take a part of money from rich Hindu temples and give it to those Hindu temples (which earns) less, not for anything else, it will not be used for any other religious centres," Siddaramaiah said.

He said, "If we bring in a bill with this purpose, the opposition will defeat it in the Council, as they have a majority there."

To a question about BJP leaders alleging that Congress government was planning to loot Hindus money, the Chief Minister said, "As they (BJP) were looting, people of the state have rejected them in the last Assembly election."

The bill among other things proposes to collect f10 per cent from temples whose income is above Rs 1 crore to be put into a Common Pool Fund. *—PTI*

A DAY WITH SCIENCE

Participants at Open Day organised by Indian Institute of Science, Bengaluru, on Saturday. ***PHOTO: MOHAMMED ASAD***

TRAFFIC ADVISORY FOR CONSTITUTION AND NATIONAL UNITY DAY

BENGALURU, 24 FEB

In view of the Constitution and National Unity programme on Sunday, Bengaluru Traffic Police has issued a traffic advisory as around more than 1 lakh people are expected to attend the event. The event will be held at Krishna Vihar in Bengaluru Palace Grounds. People arriving for the programme by buses coming from Yeshwantpur side will take diversions towards Sir CV Raman Road-BHEL Circle-Sadashivanagar PS Junction-Mekhri Circle Jayamahal Road and can park the vehicles at Circus Grounds near TV Tower. Buses coming from the Cantonment Railway Station side are supposed to take Jayamahal Road and park the vehicles at Circus Grounds near TV Tower and then reach the programme place by walking as indicated as per signboards. During exit, leave the circus grounds, take Jayamahal Road and exit the City via Mekhri Circle. According to the release, people who are coming by two and four-wheelers are advised to take Windsor Manor Junction-BDA upper ramp-Ramanamaharshi Road- PG Halli Bus Stand-Kaveri Junction-Mekhri Circle Service Road-Mekhri Circle and take a right turn to Mekhri Circle Service Road Gate No 02- Tripuravasini Palace. Park the vehicles on the ground and then reach the venue by walking as indicated on the signboards. Vehicles coming from Ballari Road-Hebbal side will arrive at Mekhri Circle Underpass then move to Gate No 02 and park the vehicles at Tripuravasini Palace ground, then reach the venue by walk as indicated by the signboards. During exit, leave the Tripuravasini Exit Gate and take Jayamahal Road and pass through Mekhri Circle. Traffic movement of heavy goods vehicles is strictly prohibited from 7:00am to 12:00pm & 3:00pm to 10:00pm to enter the City. *—Salar News*

Negative propaganda on against Constitution: CM

BENGALURU, 24 FEB

Chief Minister Siddaramaiah said there are two negative propaganda against Constitution. "One is that the Constitution is for the salvation of Dalits and the other one is that it is not in accordance with socio-economic situation," Siddaramaiah said.

The propaganda against the Constitution has existed from the day it was adopted — 26 January 1950, Siddaramaiah said at the inauguration of a two-day Constitution and National Unity Conference organised by Social Welfare Department at Palace Grounds here on Saturday. "The negative propaganda is spread by the people who are against freedom, fraternity and equality. This should not be tolerated. Only, if the Constitution is protected, we will all survive. Otherwise, we will be in danger," the Chief Minister said.

Remembering the father of the Indian Constitution BR Ambedkar, Siddaramaiah said, "Ambedkar had said those who suffer from inequality will destroy the edifice of democracy. The eradication of social inequality is the responsibility of every government. For the Constitution to succeed, it is important to know in whose hands the power rests."

"The Constitution will succeed if it is in the hands of those who are in favour of the Constitution, equality and those who want to build a human society. If it is in the hands of those who are against the Constitution, we have no survival," he added.

> **The negative propaganda is spread by the people who are against freedom, fraternity and equality. This should not be tolerated. Only, if the Constitution is protected, we will all survive. Otherwise, we will be in danger**
>
> -Siddaramaiah, Chief Minister

As part of the Amrita Mahotsava celebration of the adoption of the Constitution, a State-wide Constitution Awareness Jatha was organised in the State to make people understand the preamble and aspirations of the Constitution from 26 January 2024. The jatha has travelled through 31 districts and has informed the people about the purpose, inevitability and necessity of the Constitution.

—Salar News

MLC to govt: Install preamble at institutions, workplaces

BENGALURU, 24 FEB

MLC Dinesh Gooligowda has requested State government to make it mandatory for government and private industries, IT-BT workspaces, universities and degree colleges to install the Preamble of Constitution at the entrance. In a letter addressed to Chief Minister Siddaramaiah, Deputy Chief Minister DK Shivakumar and Social Welfare Minister HC Mahadevappa, Gooligowda said, "If awareness has to be established permanently and the commitment to the Constitution has to be instilled, then there must be its continuous visibility. Therefore, the State government should take steps to install preamble plaques in all the institutions and workspaces."Gooligowda said though the Constitution was adopted almost 75 years ago, inequality and the caste system still prevail in the country. "An equal society has not been built. We have to find a solution to this and more people should be aware of the Constitution," Gooligowda said.

—Salar News

Chief Minister Siddaramaiah and others at a two-day national-level Constitution and National Unity Convention at Palace Grounds in Bengaluru on Saturday. ***PHOTO: MOHAMMED ASAD***

BJP MP calls CM 'Siddaramulla Khan'

KARWAR, 24 FEB

Calling Chief Minister Siddaramaiah "Siddaramulla Khan", BJP MP Anantkumar Hegde has alleged that State is becoming bankrupt under the Congress government led by him, which wants to loot the State to garner votes.

Hitting back at Hegde, Siddaramaiah dubbed BJP as "anti Muslims" and "anti minority".

"Modi brought more than 370 schemes or programmes for the benefit of the people. Whether it is for agriculture, horticulture, industries, housing, Janaushadhi, almost in all sectors he has introduced programmes for the welfare of the people. He has not launched programmes that left the government bankrupt... he has rather strengthened it. India has today emerged as the fifth largest economy," Hegde, a former Union minister, pointed out.

He said Modi never compromised on the nation's interest and his government's guarantees have only made the country grow stronger.

Hegde alleged that Congress wants to loot the State to get votes. *—PTI*

58 borewells to be drilled in City

BENGALURU, 24 FEB

In a bid to tide over the looming water crisis starting in the City, Bruhat Bengaluru Mahanagara Palike (BBMP) is going to drill 58 new borewells.

Of the 58 borewells, 25 are to be dug in RR Nagar, 16 in Mahadevpura, five in Bommanahalli and three in Yelahanka and Dasarahalli. Rs 131 crore has been allocated for this project. 110 villages will be covered under this project, said Chief Commissioner Tushar Girinath on Saturday during a press conference.

Additional Chief Secretary of the Urban Development Department Rakesh Singh has also instructed the Zonal Commissioners to take appropriate measures to solve water shortage.

Water tankers will provide water to RO drinking water plants until the borewells are dug and connected, said Girinath. The tubewells across the City are handed over to the Bengaluru Water Supply and Sewage Board. "If there is a need for more tubewells in the future, the tubewell will be drilled by Jalamandali (Water Corporation), and the cost will be borne by BBMP," said the Commissioner.

—Salar News

'PM fought against dynastic politics'

BENGALURU, 24 FEB

Member of Parliament from Bangalore South Tejasvi Surya has said Prime Minister Narendra Modi has not only waged a war against dynastic politics but has also democratised the country's economic space in the last ten years.

Calling Congress leader Rahul Gandhi a "dynast", the Bharatiya Janata Yuva Morcha President said he is something today, only because he has inherited his parents and family's monetary as well as political legacy. "A dynast like Rahul Gandhi can only view the country's economy from the lens of entitlement, from the lens of dynasty," Surya said.

He was responding to Congress' narrative that Modi government is in the hands of a few crony capitalists.

Pointing out that today one can find first-generation billionaires in India who do not inherit a business legacy, he said, "Rahul Gandhi is not ready to acknowledge and recognise the democratisation of country's economy."

—PTI

IN THE CROSSHAIRS

Kalaburagi youth forced to fight for Russia, father appeals for help

DANIEL GEORGE/ BENGALURU, 24 FEB

Nawaz Ali Kalagi, father of Syed Iliyas Hussain, who is made to join Russian Wagner army for fighting against Ukraine, pleaded with the Centre and Prime Minister Narendra Modi to help bring back his son home.

Speaking to **Salar News** from Kalaburagi on Saturday, he said, "My son went to Russia on 18 December, 2023. He was told that he would be employed as a security helper. Now, he along with two other boys Mohammed Sameer Ahmed and Abdul Nayoom, also from Kalaburagi, are being asked to fight in the war," he said.

"My son was concerned about our financial situation, and when he was interviewed in Dubai for this job he fell for the offer as it amounted to a handsome amount which could turn the tide in the family's favour. I only hope the government ensures the safe release of my son and other young men who are stuck there," Kalagi said.

Representational photo

- Nawaz Ali Kalagi, father of Syed Iliyas Hussain, said along with his son a group of Indian youths have fallen victim to agents who deceitfully sent them to Russia.

He said along with his son a group of Indian youths have fallen victim to agents who deceitfully sent them to Russia. Kalagi said the three men were employed at the Dubai Airport earlier. They saw an advertisement for posts of security guards in Russia on a YouTube channel 'Baba Blog'. Kalagi said his son and the others met the chief agent Wogla and other agents Sufiyan, Moin and Pooja. They flew to Russia via Chennai, on 18 December, 2023, by an Air Arabia flight. The youth, who were earning Rs 30,000 to Rs 40,000 in Dubai, were promised salaries around Rs 2,00,000 by the agents. For the promised security personnel/helper jobs, the agents in Dubai took Rs 3,50,000 each from the youth, Kalagi said.

State Congress leader Priyank Kharge has appealed to the Centre to intervene and rescue Indian youths. "The youths were fraudulently taken there. We have written a letter in this regard to the representative of the Foreign Affairs Ministry in Bengaluru. I have also spoken to AICC President Mallikarjun Kharge. He has assured me that he will speak to Foreign Affairs Minister S Jaishankar and write a letter."

The families of the stranded young men in Russia have told Kalaburagi Deputy Commissioner Fouzia Tarannum that they have been recruited into Wagner Group, a private army allegedly funded by the Russian government to fight on the frontline in Ukraine. *—Salar News*

PM Modi to visit Kerala on 27 February

T'PURAM, 24 FEB

With Lok Sabha polls on the horizon and BJP hoping to make inroads in Kerala politics, Prime Minister Narendra Modi would be coming to the southern state on 27 February -- his third visit to the state this year.

Modi, who would be arriving in the Kerala state capital on Tuesday for an official programme, will participate in the conclusion ceremony of the 'padayatra' organised by the BJP's state unit, party sources said.The conclusion ceremony of the state-wide 'padayatra' will be held at the Central stadium here, BJP sources said.

The 'padayatra', under the leadership of the party's state president K Surendran, commenced on January 27 from the northern Kerala district of Kasaragod.

Earlier, Modi had come for a two-day visit to Kerala on 16-17 January during which he had offered prayers at Kerala's famous Lord Krishna temple in Guruvayur and attended the family wedding of actor-politician Suresh Gopi there.

—PTI

Sharad unveils symbol of his NCP faction

MUMBAI, 24 FEB

NCP Founder Sharad Pawar on Saturday unveiled his outfit's symbol man blowing turha (traditional trumpet)', calling it an inspiration to launch a new struggle for people's welfare and a government which works for their upliftment.

Months after Ajit Pawar broke away from the party to align with the ruling BJP and Eknath Shinde-led Shiv Sena in Maharashtra, the Election Commission recently recognised his faction as the real NCP and allotted its symbol Wall Clock' to it.

Later, EC allotted 'Nationalist Congress Party-Sharadchandra Pawar' as the name for Sharad Pawar's group. EC on Thursday allotted man blowing turha (traditional trumpet)' as the symbol of the senior Pawar's outfit. Pawar, 83, sought the support of his party workers in bringing a government that works for the welfare and progress of the common man. *—PTI*

ED summons ex-U'khand min in laundering case

NEW DELHI, 24 FEB

ED has summoned former Uttarakhand minister and Congress leader Harak Singh Rawat and others in money laundering investigation. ED has asked the Congress leader to appear at the agency's office for questioning on 29 February. Rawat, 63, is a former forest minister of the state and had joined the Congress ahead of the 2022 Uttarakhand Assembly polls. Notably, ED had conducted raids across Uttarakhand, Haryana, and Delhi, including Rawat's residence, on 7 February in the alleged forest scam case.

During his tenure as the state forest minister, Rawat and some of his departmental officers were allegedly involved in illegal tree cutting and construction in the Pakhro range of Corbett Park under the Tiger Safari Project. The Forest Survey of India (FSI) claimed in its report that more than 6,000 trees were illegally cut in the Corbett Tiger Reserve (CTR) against the permission of 163 for the Pakhru Tiger Safari. State forest department refuted the FSI's claims and said that some technical issues needed to be resolved. *—PTI*

Student held for issuing death threat to Shinde, son

MUMBAI, 24 FEB

The Mumbai crime branch has arrested a 19-year-old student from Pune for allegedly giving death threats to Chief Minister Eknath Shinde and his son and MP Shrikant Shinde via social media, police said on Saturday.According to Mumbai Police, the accused identified as Shubham Warkad is a first-year student, who is a native of Nanded district and had been studying in Pune. According to the complaint, the accused had posted death threats to Chief Shinde and his son Shrikant Shinde on social media on 11 February.

—ANI

'TMC MEN TORTURED TRIBALS, TOOK WAGES'

Reportedly, cops protected Shah, his aides in Sandeshkhali

NEW DELHI, 24 FEB

According to National Commission for Scheduled Tribes (NCST) TMC leader Shahjahan Sheikh and his associates, accused of land grab and sexual assault under coercion in West Bengal's Sandeshkhali, would forcibly take MNREGA wages from poor tribal families and torture them for voting against the party.

Complainants told a three-member NCST team, led by its Vice-Chairperson Ananta Nayak, that the West Bengal Police allegedly "protected" Shahjahan and his accomplices.

The probe team is back in Delhi and is in the process of filing a report, which will be sent to the government.

Nayak said that the panel has received more than 50 complaints of sexual harassment of tribal women and land grab by Shahjahan and his associates.

Sandeshkhali area in West Bengal's North 24 Parganas district has been on the boil for more than a month with protests against TMC leader Shahjahan, who is absconding, and his supporters.

The accused and his associates tortured people who voted for other parties in elections *PHOTO: ANI*

The complaints, the majority of whom are Hindus, told the probe team that the accused and his associates tortured people who voted for other parties in elections, the NCST vice-chairperson said.

The panel learned that Shahjahan and his associates would ask local women to come for meetings late at night, torturing the family members of those who did not comply with his demands, he said.

"If the victim approached the police, they would not file an FIR or a complaint and instead ask the complainants to 'negotiate' with Shahjahan. The police backed the accused in this case," the NCST vice-chairperson said.

The complaints also told the NCST team that the accused would ask tribal families to hand over their land to him and release saltwater in the fields if they protested.

—PTI

WB mins pays visit ,CPI(M) leader stopped

Kolkata, 24 Feb

West Bengal Ministers Sujit Bose and Partha Bhowmick on Saturday visited trouble-torn Sandeshkhali to take stock of the situation, while a CPI(M) delegation led by Minakshi Mukhopadhay was prevented by the police from venturing into interior areas of the region in North 24 Parganas district.

State Fire Services Minister Bose and Irrigation Minister Partha Bhowmick, accompanied by Sandeshkhali MLA Sukumar Mahato, toured the area and spoke to the villagers, listening to their grievances.

—PTI

TDP TO FIGHT 94 SEATS

TDP candidates will be contesting from 94 constituencies while Janasena will contest from 24 seats, as per the first list *PHOTO: PTI*

TDP, Janasena announce list for 118 seats in Andhra

AMARAVATI, 24 FEB

- **As part of the alliance, Janasena will contest three Lok Sabha seats of the total 25 from the state**

TDP Supremo N Chandrababu Naidu and Janasena Chief Pawan Kalyan on Saturday announced their first joint list of 118 seats for the forthcoming Assembly polls in Andhra Pradesh.

The two leaders, however, said the seat allocation has been done keeping in mind the "need to accommodate" BJP in case the saffron party decides to join the alliance.

TDP candidates will be contesting from 94 constituencies while Janasena will contest from 24 seats, as per the first list.

Observing that TDP-Janasena alliance "has the blessings of BJP", Kalyan read out the names of five Janasena candidates and promised to reveal the remaining 19 names in a couple of days.

Explaining the rationale behind the Janasena taking only 24 seats, Kalyan noted that it is important to take a lower number of seats than experimenting with a higher number of seats.

Including the three Lok Sabha seats allocated for Janasena in the alliance, he noted that it is as good as the party contesting some 40 Assembly seats.

Meanwhile, Naidu highlighted that if BJP also comes along with their alliance then those issues will also be discussed at the right time to take the right decisions.

Out of the 94 candidates, Naidu said 23 are first-timers, three doctors, one retired IAS officer, 25 post-graduates, 51 graduates and three doctorates.

Seat-sharing arrangement for the remaining 57 of the 175 Assembly constituencies are expected to be announced soon.

As part of the alliance, Janasena will contest three Lok Sabha seats of the total 25 from the state.

TDP sources said currently discussions were underway with the BJP for a possible pre-poll alliance.

—PTI

Farmers' stir: Delhi border to be partially opened

The two borders were sealed on 13 February as protesting farmers from Punjab began their 'Delhi Chalo' march *PHOTO: PTI*

NEW DELHI, 24 FEB

Authorities here initiated the process of partially reopening Singhu and Tikri borders with Haryana on Saturday, almost two weeks after they were sealed in view of farmers' 'Delhi Chalo' march, officials said.

A Delhi Police officer said one lane of the service lane at the Singhu border and one lane at the Tikri border are being opened to allow movement of vehicles.

The opening of Singhu and Tikri borders will bring relief to those travelling from Delhi to Haryana.

The two borders were sealed on 13 February as protesting farmers from Punjab began their 'Delhi Chalo' march to press their demands, including minimum support price (MSP) for crops and a farm loan waiver.

Thousands of farmers have been camping on the Punjab-Haryana border near Ambala, about 200 kilometres from Delhi, after their march was thwarted by security personnel.

The farmers have been camping at the border points with their tractor-trolleys, mini-vans, and pickup trucks.

Meanwhile, farmer leader Sarwan Singh Pandher on Saturday, said that on 26 February, the effigies of the WTO, corporate houses, and governments will be burned. *—PTI*

Handover hurt farmer: Punjab to Haryana

Chandigarh, 24 Feb

Punjab Chief Secretary Anurag Verma on Saturday wrote to his Haryana counterpart demanding that a farmer who was injured in clashes during the 'Delhi Chalo' march and is undergoing treatment at PGI Rohtak be handed over to the Punjab authorities.Verma said that any other farmer from Punjab undergoing treatment in Haryana should also be handed over .A protester was killed and about 12 police personnel were injured in clash.

POLITICAL SLUGFEST

Narendra Modi speaks during the foundation stone laying ceremony of multiple projects in New Delhi, on Saturday; Congress leaders Rahul Gandhi and Priyanka Gandhi during the 'Bharat Jodo Nyay Yatra', in Moradabad, on Saturday ` *PHOTO: PTI*

Congress all about parivarvaad: Modi

RAIPUR, 24 FEB

Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Saturday attacked the Congress saying the grand old party cannot think beyond parivarvaad' (nepotism), corruption and appeasement and the country's development was never on its agenda.

After Independence, Congress ruled the country for a long time but its focus was only on forming the government and not building the future of the country, said Modi while virtually addressing the Viksit Bharat Viksit Chhattisgarh' programme.He dedicated to the nation and laid the foundation stones of 10 development projects worth over Rs 34,400 crore on the occasion and said when India becomes the world's third-largest economy in the next five years, Chhattisgarh will reach new heights of development."..those who ruled the country for a long time after Independence, their thinking was not big and they kept on taking decisions keeping in mind (their) political interests. Congress was elected to power again and again but forgot to build the future of the country," the PM said.

Modi said those who are only busy making the future of their sons and daughters can never think about "your sons and daughters" *—PTI*

Priyanka slams BJP's use of bulldozer

LUCKNOW, 24 FEB

Congress leader Priyanka Gandhi Vadra on Saturday lashed out at BJP government in Uttar Pradesh, alleging that bulldozers are used to demolish homes of "innocent people" while the "guilty" escape unscathed.

"The farmers were protesting yesterday. The farmers are protesting today also but the government is not listening to them. In Uttar Pradesh, bulldozers did not run on the homes of those who crushed farmers under their jeeps, tortured women and leaked question papers. Here, bulldozer is not moved on guilty but only on the homes of innocent people," she said. She said "nyay" was added to the name because injustice is being done to women, children and farmers of the country.

Addressing the public in Moradabad, she said, "When I came here in 2022, we had made a plan in the manifesto on how to stop repeated question paper leaks. It consisted of a job calendar, which would have the examination date and the date of appointment. We also spoke about making a commission to address all the injustices that had taken place."

She added that "until you bring about a change, your circumstances will not change". *—PTI*

Haldwani violence 'mastermind' arrested

DEHRADUN, 24 FEB

Uttarakhand police on Saturday arrested the key accused in the violence, that took place in Banbhulpura, Haldwani on 8 February.

State Director General of Police Abhinav Kumar has announced a cash reward of Rs 50,000 for the Uttarakhand Police team that arrested Abdul Malik from Delhi, spokesperson IG Nilesh Bharne said.

The arrested accused, Abdul Malik, will soon be produced in court, said the police.Uttarakhand Police Headquarters (PHQ) Spokesperson Nilesh Anand Bharne said, Earlier on Wednesday, the police said that a total of 74 people had been arrested in the case.

The authorities had said that the violence had broken out during an anti-encroachment drive in Haldwani *PHOTO: PTI*

The authorities had said that the violence had broken out during an anti-encroachment drive in Haldwani.Stone-pelting incidents, torching of vehicles, and a mob surrounding the local police station were witnessed during the violence. To contain the situation, the administration had to issue a shoot-at-sight order in the area.

The Municipal Corporation here issued a recovery notice of Rs 2.44 crore against Abdul Malik, a key accused in the violence at Haldwani, asking him to deposit the money to cover damage caused to government property during the clash.In the violence, four people were killed and 250 policemen were injured. According to the police, the mob burnt down Banbhulpura police station. A curfew had to be imposed in the entire town for two days.

Police deny allegations of 'misbehaviour' with women

Police Headquarters spokesperson IG Nilesh Anand Bharne refuted the news spread on social media regarding the alleged police "misbehaviour" with women in connection with the violence that broke out in the Banbhulpura area of Haldwani during an encroachment drive earlier in the month, according to an official statement. *—ANI*

LS polls: DMK begins seat allocations

CHENNAI, 24 FEB

The Tamil Nadu's ruling DMK, a key constituent of the opposition INDIA bloc, on Saturday allotted one Lok Sabha constituency each to two of its allies.

Weeks after initiating seat sharing talks with allies for the April-May Lok Sabha polls, the seat sharing agreement was signed by DMK President and Chief Minister MK Stalin and leaders of alliance parties at the party headquarters 'Anna Arivalayam,' here.The main opposition AIADMK and the BJP are yet to announce their allies.

While the DMK's long time ally, Indian Union Muslim League (IUML) was allotted the Ramanathapuram segment in southern Tamil Nadu, the Dravidian party earmarked Namakkal constituency for the west-Tamil Nadu based partner Kongunadu Makkal Desiya Katchi (KMDK).KM Kader Mohideen, national president of the IUML said his party's incumbent MP from Ramanathapuram, Navas Kani, will be renominated to contest the Lok Sabha polls.

Mohideen told reporters that his party requested a Rajya Sabha seat from the DMK during seat sharing talks. *—PTI*

3-TIME CONGRESS TAMIL NADU MLA JOINS BJP

Vijayadharani *PHOTO: PTI*

NEW DELHI, 24 FEB

S Vijayadharani, a Congress MLA from Tamil Nadu for three consecutive terms, joined the BJP on Saturday, asserting that the leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi is very important for the country.

The development is a shot in the arm for the BJP in the southern state where it has struggled to gain ground.She is the MLA from Vilavancode, which is part of the Kanyakumari Lok Sabha seat, a constituency the BJP has won in the past.She posted on X her letter of resignation. She joined the party in the nationa l capital in the presence of Union Minister L Murugan and the party's national secretary Arvind Menon, who is the poll in-charge for Tamil Nadu.

Vijayadharani lauded the central government for its various good schemes and lamented that some of those are not being implemented in Tamil Nadu, where the DMK-Congress alliance is in power. *—PTI*

FEASIBILITY OF PROMISES

Public should be made aware: CEC

CHENNAI, 24 FEB

Voters have a right to know about the feasibility of fulfilling poll assurances made by political parties, Chief Election Commissioner Rajiv Kumar said on Saturday and made it clear that the matter is, however, sub judice.

Political parties have a right to make promises in their election manifestos and the electorate has a right to know if these are genuine and how these programmes could be funded, he said, adding the entire matter forms part of an ongoing case and the matter was sub judice.At a press conference here, Rajiv Kumar, answering questions, said the Election Commission has prepared a 'proforma' to make parties to make a disclosure on their election promises. However, this aspect also relates to the pending court matter.He said enforcement agencies have been directed to stay vigilant and prevent distribution of cash and freebies. National Payments Corporation of India too has been tasked to monitor online transactions.After holding meetings with political parties during the last two days, Rajiv Kumar said "a majority of parties informed him that many parties have commenced parking of funds for distribution to voters."The parties also sought action to prevent 'voter impersonation,' *—PTI*

Rajiv Kumar *PHOTO: PTI*

PRESSURE BEING PUT ON US TO WALK OUT OF INDIA BLOC, ALLEGES AAP

NEW DELHI, 24 FEB

Aam Aadmi Party leader Dilip Pandey has alleged that pressure is being put on his party and on Delhi Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal to walk out of the INDIA bloc.

Pandey also claimed that after Enforcement Directorate (ED), BJP government is trying to put Kejriwal behind bars through Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI).

However, BJP has denied these allegations, stating that AAP is playing 'victimhood'.

Pandey said that the party is not afraid and will fight democratically.

"BJP felt that an alliance between AAP and Congress would not be possible, they went into waiting mode. As the alliance took a concrete shape, BJP started attacking AAP," he said.

"BJP is so scared of INDIA bloc that now CBI pressure is being put on us so that we come out of the alliance," he alleged. *—ANI*

PHOTO: PIXABAY

MP: Officials seize animal parts from ayurvedic shop

VIDISHA, 24FEB

Forest officials raided an Ayurvedic medicine shop and seized body parts of wild animals used in witchcraft and "power-enhancing" remedies in Madhya Pradesh's Vidisha city, an official said on Saturday. The shop and its godown located in the Bada Bazar area were raided on Friday, said Forest Sub Divisional Officer (SDO) Vijay Maurya.He said that a gang involved in the smuggling of body parts of wildlife animals was recently busted in Delhi and Jabalpur and its members revealed that they had made a few supplies to an ayurvedic shop in Vidisha. Acting on the input, the raid was conducted, said Maurya.Body parts of wildlife animals, including horns of "barasingha, sambhar, powder of ivory teeth, rabbit teeth, tails and nails" were seized during the raid.The shop owner has been arrested and he will be produced in court, the official added.—*PTI*

Actor held for raping kin after promising marriage

DURG, 24 FEB

Chhattisgarh actor-director-producer Manoj Rajput was held for allegedly raping a close relative for the past 13 years after promising to marry her, a police official said on Saturday. He was held from his office in the state's Durg district on Friday on the complaint of the 29-year-old victim, the official said."On 22 February, she lodged a complaint at the Old Bhilai railway police station about Rajput sexually exploiting her since 2011 on the pretext of marriage. After he reneged on his promise, she approached police," Station House Officer (SHO) Rajkumar Borjha said. Rajput was charged under Indian Penal Code sections for rape, unnatural sex, and other offences as well as the Protection of Children from Sexual Offences Act since the victim was a minor when the alleged exploitation began, Borjha said. —*PTI*

Woman arrested for kidnapping TV anchor in Telangana

HYDERABAD, 24 FEB

A woman was arrested for allegedly stalking and kidnapping a TV anchor in the Medchal Malkajgiri district of Telangana to marry him, police said.The accused woman was identified as Bogireddy Trishna, a digital marketer. She also allegedly installed a GPS device in the TV anchor's car to monitor his movements, they said. Earlier, a kidnapping case was registered under the Uppal police station after Pranav Sista, a software engineer and also working as an anchor in Gemini TV, reported that he was abducted by four individuals on 11 February while he was returning from his office. According to the police, Pranav bargained with kidnappers, somehow managed to escape.—*PTI*

Kerala priest hit by car for objecting to high-speed driving

KOTTAYAM 24 FEB

A priest was hit by a vehicle near a church in Krerala's Kottayam a day ago by some boys for objecting to their high speed driving within the grounds of the place of worship, police said today. According to police, the incident occurred on Friday afternoon at the St Mary's Forane Church at Poonjar. A group of boys in several vehicles, drove at high speed and made a lot of noise there, police said. one of the priests objected. As the boys did not heed him,a car hit him from behind. —*PTI*

Navy ship rescues vessel attacked in Gulf of Aden

1 injured after the vessel was attacked by drones

NEW DELHI, 24 FEB

An Indian warship provided critical assistance to a merchant vessel after it caught fire following a suspected drone or missile attack in the Gulf of Aden, the latest in a series of such support missions in the region.

Palau-flagged vessel MV Islander came under attack on Thursday and a crew member of the ship sustained injuries, Indian military officials said on Saturday.

An explosive ordnance disposal team of the Navy embarked the vessel and sanitised it for any residual risk following which the vessel was cleared for onward transit, they said.

The fresh incident comes amid growing global concerns over attacks on various commercial vessels in the Red Sea by Houthi militants.

A medical team of the Indian Navy also embarked MV Islander and provided medical assistance to the injured crew member, they said.

In a swift response to a distress call from the vessel, the Indian warship arrived in the vicinity of the cargo ship within a few hours to provide critical support, an official said.

"Relentless efforts by Indian Naval ships reaffirms the Indian Navy's steadfast commitment towards safety and security of merchant shipping and seafarers," Indian Navy spokesperson Commander Vivek Madhwal said.

In the last few weeks, the Indian Navy extended assistance to a number of merchant vessels in the Western Indian Ocean following attacks on them.

Palau-flagged vessel MV Islander came under attack on Thursday PHOTO: X

- Palau-flagged vessel MV Islander came under attack on Thursday and a crew member of the ship sustained injuries, Indian military officials said

The Indian Navy, earlier this month, foiled a piracy attempt on an Iranian-flagged fishing vessel with a crew of 11 Iranian and eight Pakistani nationals along the east coast of Somalia.

The Navy has already enhanced deployment of its frontline ships and surveillance aircraft for maritime security operations in view of the maritime environment in the critical sea lanes, including in the north and central Arabian Sea. —*PTI*

TO MEITEI AREAS

Manipur police halts transfer of Kuki cops

IMPHAL, 24 FEB

The Manipur Police have halted the movement of transferred personnel "wherever applicable, in view of the current crisis". They stated that the transfer orders remain in effect but the personnel will be moved as and when required.

The halt in the movement of transferred personnel came after a tribal body wrote to Union Home Minister Amit Shah expressing concern over the safety of Kuki policemen in Meitei-dominated areas.

The police stated that the transfer orders were issued to streamline excess manpower but there was no need for immediate movement of the personnel at this stage in view of the current crisis.

"Reference to Manipur Police Headquarter order dated 14.02.2024 regarding transfer and posting of 177 (One hundred and seventy-seven) personnel of all communities of MR/IR units to various units, it is informed that the transfer and posting has been done in order to streamline the excess manpower against the sanctioned post available in all MR/IR units and to facilitate the process for preparation of their salaries," Manipur Police posted on X on Friday.

Indigenous Tribal Leaders Forum (ITLF) had written to Shah calling for his intervention to stop the transfer orders PHOTO: PTI

- The police stated that the transfer orders were issued to streamline excess manpower but there was no need for immediate movement of the personnel at this stage in view of the current crisis.

"However, in view of the present crisis, there is no immediate movement of the personnel required at this stage," it added.

Churachandpur-based Indigenous Tribal Leaders Forum (ITLF) had on Friday written to Shah calling for his intervention to stop the transfer orders as it required the movement of Kuki-Zo police personnel to Meitei-dominated areas.

The tribal body claimed that the "state government would not be able to guarantee the safety" of Kuki Zo personnel if they were stationed in districts dominated by Meiteis.

—*PTI*

REMEMBERING THE IRON LADY

AIADMK General Secretary Edappadi K Palaniswami (EPS) pays homage to former Tamil Nadu chief minister J Jayalalithaa on her 76th birth anniversary, in Chennai, on Saturday. AIADMK released an artificial intelligence-generated audio clip of Jayalalithaa asking people to support EPS and ensure the party's win PHOTO: PTI

Centre warns Google over 'unreliable' AI model

NEW DELHI, 24 FEB

Union Minister Rajeev Chandrasekhar on Saturday made it clear to Google that explanations about unreliability of AI models do not absolve or exempt platforms from laws, and warned that India's digital 'nagriks' "are not to be experimented on" with unreliable platforms and algorithms.

The minister's comments came after Google, which is under fire over AI tool Gemini's objectionable response and bias to a question on Prime Minister Narendra Modi, said it has worked quickly to address the issue and conceded that the chatbot "may not always be reliable" in responding to certain prompts related to current events and political topics.

Chandrasekhar, the Minister of State for IT, in a post on X (formerly Twitter) said ensuring safety and trust are legal obligation of platforms.

PHOTO: PIXABAY

"Government has said this before - I repeat for attention of @GoogleIndia...Our DigitalNagriks are NOT to be experimented on with "unreliable" platforms/algos/model...₹Sorry Unreliable' does not exempt from law," the minister said.

On Friday, Chandrasekhar had warned that Google AI tool Gemini's response to a question around the prime minister was in direct violation of IT rules as well as several provisions of the criminal code.

In an e-mail statement earlier on Saturday, a Google spokesperson said, "We've worked quickly to address this issue."

Google further said Gemini is built as a creativity and productivity tool and "may not always be reliable, especially when it comes to responding to some prompts about current events, political topics, or evolving news".

The minister had, in fact, marked the post to Google and Ministry of Electronics and IT indicating further action in the matter on Friday.

—*PTI*

FLYERS TRAPPED IN MUMBAI-MAURITIUS FLIGHT FOR 5 HOURS

MUMBAI, 24 FEB

Passengers on board an Air Mauritius flight were stuck on the aircraft for over five hours at Mumbai airport on Saturday before the airline decided to cancel it, one among the flyers said.

The Air Mauritius flight MK 749 from Mumbai to Mauritius was to depart at 4.30am and passengers boarded the plane from 3.45 am onwards, he said.There were nearly 200 passengers on board, including a 78-year-old man who developed a breathing problem as the aircraft's air-conditioning system was not working, he alleged."The plane developed an engine problem but the passengers remained locked inside for over five hours" he said. —*PTI*

Police recruitment exam cancelled in UP, retest within 6 months

LUCKNOW, 24 FEB

The Uttar Pradesh government has cancelled the police constable recruitment examination that was held statewide on 17 and 18 February after the examination paper was allegedly leaked, Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath said on Saturday.The Uttar Pradesh Police Recruitment and Promotion Board organised the examination.

Yogi in a post on X, said that the state government has ordered to conduct the re-examination for the same within six months.

"UP Police constable civil police exams 2023 cancelled, orders given to re-conduct the exams within next six months...." Yogi said. He further said that strict action would be taken against those who would be found guilty in the alleged paper leak.

"There can be no compromise with the sanctity of examinations. Those who play with the hard work of the youth will not be spared under any circumstances. Strictest action is certain to be taken against such unruly elements," Yogi added.

UP government has also issued an order to investigate the alleged irregularities and rigging in the examination of the Review Officer/Assistant Review Officer, not in the paper but at the government level. —*ANI*

SC questions TN for filing plea against ED summons to officials

NEW DELHI, 24 FEB

The Supreme Court has questioned the Tamil Nadu government for filing a plea in the Madras High Court against the Enforcement Directorate for its probe in a money laundering case.

The central probe agency had summoned the district collectors of Vellore, Tiruchirappalli, Karur, Thanjavur and Ariyalur in connection with its probe in the illegal sand mining case.

The state government along with the bureaucrats had moved the Madras High Court that stayed the summons issued by the Enforcement Directorate. The agency had moved the top court against the order.

"How can the state file this writ petition? Under which law? You satisfy us on how the state is interested and how it can file this writ petition against Enforcement Directorate. How is the state aggrieved," a bench comprising justices Bela M Trivedi and Pankaj Mithal asked the counsel appearing for the Tamil Nadu government.

PHOTO: PTI

The bench said the officials should cooperate with the ED.Senior advocates Mukul Rohatgi and Amit Anand Tiwari, appearing for the state government, said that Tamil Nadu is bound to protect its officials from "illegal" probe of the agency.

The High Court, while staying the summons, had said that the ED was venturing into a fishing expedition to find out whether information and evidence collected from the district administration can be processed further from other sources to find out commission of the scheduled offences.

Additional Solicitor General SV Raju, appearing for the probe agency, told court that the district collectors are not among the accused and were summoned only as witnesses.

—*PTI*

MoD okays cash reward for service athletes

NEW DELHI, 24 FEB

Defence Minister Rajnath Singh has approved a financial incentive for armed forces' personnel who won medals at the 19th Asian Games and 4th Asian Para Games held in Hangzhou, China, in September-October 2023.

For both Asian Games as well as Asian Para Games, Gold medal winners will receive a cash reward of Rs 25 lakh each, Silver medal winners Rs 15 lakh each and Bronze medal winners Rs 10 lakh each.

According to a press release by the Ministry of Defence, the initiative aims to reward and motivate these athletes for their dedication and excellence on the international stage.

After their triumphant return, the medal-winning service athletes were honoured by the Defence Minister who praised their exemplary display of skill and sportsmanship.

He had also approved cash rewards to 45 medal winners, including seven Para athletes.

These 45 athletes won 9 Gold, 18 Silver and 17 Bronze medals in the Asian Games and 1 Gold, four Silver and two Bronze medals in Asian Para Games, read the press release. —*ANI*

EX-SC JUDGE SAYS

'Delay in listing live issues affect quality of justice'

NEW DELHI, 24 FEB

Prolonged delay in listing of "live issues" like matters pertaining to demonetisation and abrogation of Article 370 of the Constitution, and predictable pronouncements affect the quality of justice and create a perception that there is "something wrong" with the judicial system, former Supreme Court judge Madan B Lokur said on Saturday.

Speaking at a seminar organised by the Campaign for Judicial Accountability and Reforms (CJAR) here, he said the problem with listing of cases is not something new and has been there for a very long time, particularly in the Supreme Court.

"But today we are talking about it because the stakes today are much higher than what they were many years ago," Justice Lokur said while addressing the seminar's first session titled 'Supreme Court Administration and Management- Issues and Concerns'.

He said matters like demonetisation, Article 370, and electoral bonds for political funding were listed in the apex court for hearing after many years.

Ex-Judge Madan B Lokur said matters like demonetisation, Article 370, were listed in SC for hearing after years PHOTO: PIXABAY

"We have had issues pertaining to demonetisation, listed after I think four or five years. We have had issues related to electoral bonds, listed after five years," he said.

"Today, the perception is, you know if a case goes before a particular bench this is going to be the result," Justice Lokur said.

"So, you would have a situation where somebody, a journalist, wants bail. The case is listed the same day, maybe in the evening. Somebody has been granted bail and the prosecution says the grant of bail by the high court is wrong. So, a special bench sits on a Saturday and stays that order which is very, very unusual," he said.

"So, the timing of listing of case is very, important in some instances," the former SC judge said.

Justice Lokur also referred to the case of former JNU student and activist Umar Khalid, who recently withdrew his bail plea from the apex court in a case lodged against him under anti-terror law UAPA over his alleged involvement in the conspiracy behind the northeast Delhi riots of February 2020.

"Not listed for a long time...13 adjournments. Ultimately, the lawyer said we want to withdraw the case. Why?" he said, adding Khalid's lawyer knew what the result was going to be.

He said getting bail in cases lodged under the UAPA and the Prevention of Money Laundering Act (PMLA) has almost become impossible. —*PTI*

FDA revokes McDonald's licence over fake cheese

MUMBAI, 24 FEB

The Maharashtra Food and Drug Administration (FDA) has revoked the licence of a McDonald's outlet in the state's Ahmednagar district after taking action against it over cheese, an official said on Saturday.

The eatery belonging to the fast food giant had faced FDA scrutiny for allegedly using a "cheese-like" product in their dishes without indicating that it was actually a cheese substitute, thereby misleading customers, he said.

Following an inspection and subsequent objections, the licence of the outlet was suspended, but it was revoked recently after the chain filed a compliance report confirming that they had removed the word 'cheese' from product names.

FDA sought the fast food giant's clarification over the presence of milk fat and vegetable fat in products advertised as containing cheese.

"Since their clarification was unsatisfactory, we suspended their licence in November last year. They appealed against the suspension before the FDA commissioner in Mumbai.

The commissioner heard arguments from both sides and instructed the fast food restaurant chain that they cannot use the word 'cheese' in their product names if they are not using real cheese," he said. In the order, FDA Commissioner Abhimanyu Kale directed McDonald's to revise their labelling and prominently tag the products as "cheese analogue nuggets" or "non-dairy cheese nuggets" in a font size and colour that is easily visible. —*PTI*

BLAZING FIRE

Firefighters work at a burned block building in Valencia, Spain on Friday. A fire has engulfed two residential buildings in the eastern Spanish city of Valencia, killing at least four people and injuring at least 13 others. Emergency services reported that at least 19 people were still missing several hours after the fire started
PHOTO: PTI

We are exhausted, but resilient, say Ukrainians

TWO YEARS OF RUSSIA-UKRAINE WAR

Ukrainian volunteers are helping the war effort by building smoke grenades and stitching camouflage nettings
PHOTO: BBC/SCARLETT BARTER

It translates as "crooked horn", but President Zelensky calls Kryvyi Rih his "big soul and heart".

He credits this gritty, industrial city with moulding his character. He grew up in a sprawling block of flats known as the Anthill.

When you stand in front of this towering structure, Volodymyr Zelensky's journey from this setting to wartime leader feels remarkable.

"I want the war to end soon," says Vita, who lived near Zelensky's parents. "He's a normal, good guy who fights for people. I just want this war and the sirens to end sooner."

But with minimal Ukrainian progress and growing Russian dominance, there is no end in sight, and that's both fuelling and being fuelled by influential pockets of Western doubters.

At the recent Munich Security Conference, President Zelensky told delegates not to ask Ukraine when the war would end, but instead to "ask why Putin is still able to continue it".

With blocked military aid now directly hampering his forces on the front line, it was a swipe at those delaying the ammunition and weapons his soldiers desperately need.

"I'm no politician," confesses Valeriy, a man in his 80s perched outside a grocery shop. "We can't ask when the war will stop again.

"We must fight; we won't tolerate anything else. People are so angry now."

That appetite to defend has remained mostly intact since that morning on 24 February 2022. Against a terrifying unknown, people volunteered in their thousands to join Ukraine's fight.

President Zelensky's profile and popularity went stratospheric as he turned down offers of evacuation and remained in Kyiv.

"I need ammunition, not a ride," he said in a now iconic quote.

His needs have not changed, but his pleas have lost their electrifying impact.

A failed counter-offensive in 2023 led to uncomfortable questions over whether Ukraine is capable of liberating its territory.Republican doubters in the US are hindering Ukraine's ability to fight by blocking billions of dollars worth of military aid. Kyiv says more frontline troops are dying as a result of weapon shortages and dwindling ammunition.

All the while, Russia has remained on a war footing, and its allies North Korea and Iran are supplying more missiles to rain down on Ukrainian cities.

Kryvyi Rih isn't immune to the fatigue most of the country feels. Some have had enough of this war, many men are fearful of being conscripted, and yet they say the conflict is still a fight for survival.

The idea of a compromise or concession to Russia is viewed as a defeat. It's existential.

The last time I saw children play in one was at a school next to my flat in Kyiv, before the invasion. Now they are the site of a devastating missile strike, lying abandoned on a front line, or in Brovary, near Kyiv, the scene of a helicopter crash.

In Kryvyi Rih, we meet a tearful Yuriy as he watches his flat get demolished after a missile strike last year. Exposed wallpaper patterns reveal the different lives destroyed.

"No one needs this war, what is it for anyway?" he asks. "So many people are being killed."

So, does he think Ukraine should swap territory for peace?

"Definitely not," he replies bluntly. "A lot of people died for those territories. There is no point in giving them up."

The lack of battlefield progress caused a corrosive rift between President Zelensky and the head of his armed forces Valerii Zaluzhnyi. Now sacked, General Zaluzhnyi is seen as a potential political rival to his old boss.

Around Kryvyi Rih, Ukrainians try to help where their country's allies increasingly will not. In one inconspicuous building, a growing army of volunteers stitch camouflage nettings for troops on the front line.The men and women are kept separate because of "their different jokes," explains the organiser.

In another industrial wing of the city, a former bike club has swapped cycling for smoke. Teams mix chemicals into canisters which will become smoke grenades. A useful military tool if you are trying to attack, or evacuate the injured.

"It's impossible to stay at home with my thoughts when my husband is fighting," explains Ines, one of the volunteers. "Here I feel I can do something to make it easier for them."

On the 731st day of the full-scale invasion, it's a different kind of war.

While extraordinary, Ukraine's successes in defence and degrading Russia's navy have not changed the tide in its favour.

The novelty of this war has gone. Ukraine, Kryvyi Rih and its famous son will need to find new reserves of strength and a clever playbook to keep the world engaged.

—BBC News

SALAR ساڵار

How AI is helping search for extraterrestrial life

There are between 10 and 50 billion potentially habitable worlds in our galaxy, says Bill Diamond. It makes his job rather difficult.

Diamond is the Chief executive of the US-based research organisation Seti Institute. The letters "Seti" are an acronym for the Search for Extraterrestrial Intelligence (Seti).

"Seti, as an endeavour, is looking for science and technology beyond the solar system as evidence of life and intelligence, and that's by and large a needle in a haystack problem," he says.

"We're looking for something that is likely exceedingly rare, and may be very difficult to find and extract from the background phenomena that you're observing at the same time."

But new tools are helping the search. The ability of artificial intelligence (AI) to both handle massive datasets - and to spot anomalies - is transforming the hunt for alien intelligence.

One such project involves a Seti Institute partnership with the US's National Radio Astronomy Observatory in New Mexico. This federal facility uses radio frequencies to study celestial objects, such as planets, stars and asteroids.

Seti is building a parallel, AI-powered software system for the observatory's core facility, the Very Large Array. Built between 1973 and 1981, the VLA comprises 28 large, 25m diameter, dish antennas spaced out across a desert plain. Imagine the satellite dishes you find on people's homes, just on a giant scale.

When operational, the AI will be able to process every bit of data captured - two terabytes (TB) every second. To put that into context, modern laptops now typically have around 1TB of total storage.

Diamond says that the increased use of AI is already proving to be "indispensable" as his institute continues to hunt for alien life.

He points to AI making it possible to search for new types of radio signals from alien sources. He explains that traditionally, Seti has looked for narrowband signals similar to those used by human beings.

However, Diamond says that the ability of AI to handle massive amounts of data means it's possible to take millions of "snapshots" of this snowy audio picture over time, and to start to look for patterns. "It's a way of adding on a new thing to look for."Another project with which Seti collaborates is Breakthrough Listen. Backed by more than £100m of private sector funding, this scheme is scanning a million stars, and 100 galaxies, across a wide range of radio and optical bands, to look for evidence of technological life.

One project member, University of Toronto student Peter Ma, recently developed a new AI system designed to examine telescope data, and distinguish between possible real signals from aliens, and interference.His team did this by simulating both types of noise, and then training their AI to differentiate between the two.Ma says that an alien signal would, for example, "only appear when we point our telescopes at it... and disappear when we point away".

The project has already identified eight potential alien signals that went undetected by traditional analysis. However, Ma believes that as the observations haven't yet been repeated they are probably false positives.

AI is also being used to try to detect signs of life of a more modest nature, and closer to home.Already, scientists believe that the rover's Sherloc instrument has detected organic compounds, which glow under ultraviolet light.However, organic compounds can be created by non-biological processes, meaning that it's not yet possible to say whether they derive from past life on the planet.

All this could change, though, thanks to new research from the Carnegie Institution for Science, which is using AI to analyse rock samples for signs of present or past life.

The team found that the AI is able to distinguish former living and non-living material, with an accuracy of almost 90 per cent .

"This is a very new approach to searching for molecular biosignatures," says joint lead researcher Dr Robert Hazen.

"We employ machine learning to look at all of the vast amount of data from an analytical method that produces half a million data points per sample. So we're seeking subtle patterns in molecular distributions."

The first plans are to use the system to analyse ancient samples from Earth, as well as some Martian samples in the form of meteorites. But, says Hazen, "We could, for example, fly an instrument through the plumes of Enceladus [one of Saturn's moons], or land a carefully designed instrument on Mars."It's early days, and any promising results generated by AI need to be validated by other observations, or by physics-based models, before they can be shouted from the rooftops. But as more and more data is collected and analysed, the chances of detecting alien life - if it exists - are increasing all the time.

—BBC News

Seti Institute has partnered with National Radio Astronomy Observatory in New Mexico to use radio frequencies to study celestial objects
PHOTO: NATIONAL RADIO ASTRONOMY OBSERVATORY

LETTERS

Write to us at salar@salar.news

Government using large data to make schemes more inclusive

If data is not handled thoughtfully, it can lead to inequitable outcomes for different communities because data gathered by governments can mirror existing inequalities
PHOTO: PIXABAY

Governments increasingly rely on large amounts of data to provide services ranging from mobility and air quality to child welfare and policing programs. While governments have always relied on data, their increasing use of algorithms and artificial intelligence has fundamentally changed the way they use data for public services.

These technologies have the potential to improve the effectiveness and efficiency of public services. But if data is not handled thoughtfully, it can lead to inequitable outcomes for different communities because data gathered by governments can mirror existing inequalities. To minimize this effect, governments can make inclusion an element of their data practices. To better understand how data practices affect inclusion, there are four activities: data collection, storage, analysis and use.

Collection

Governments collect data about all manner of subjects via surveys, registrations, social media and in real time via mobile devices such as sensors, cellphones and body cameras. These datasets provide opportunities to shape social inclusion and equity. For example, open data can be used as a spotlight to expose health disparities or inequalities in commuting.

At the same time, we found that poor-quality data can worsen inequalities. Data that is incomplete, outdated or inaccurate can result in the underrepresentation of vulnerable groups because they may not have access to the technology used to collect the data. Also, government data collection might lead to over surveillance of vulnerable communities. Consequently, some people may choose to avoid contributing data to government institutions.

To foster inclusive practices, government practitioners could work with citizens to develop inclusive data collection protocols.

Storage

Data storage refers to where and how data is stored by the government, such as in databases or cloud data storage services. We found that government decisions about access to stored data and data ownership might lead to administrative exclusion, meaning unintentionally restricting citizen access to benefits and services. For example, administrative registration errors in applications for services and the difficulty citizens experience when they attempt to correct errors in stored data can lead to differences in how governments treat them and even a loss of public services.

We also found that personal data might be stored with cloud vendors in data warehouses outside the influence of the government organizations that initially created and collected the data.

While governments are typically required to follow rigorous data collection practices, data storage companies do not necessarily need to comply with the same standards.

To overcome this problem, governments can set transparency and accountability requirements for data storage that foster inclusion.

Analysis

One important way governments analyze data to extract information is by using algorithms. For example, predictive policing uses algorithms to predict where crime will occur.

A key question is who is conducting the analysis. Those who might be providing data, such as citizens or civil society organizations, are less likely to analyze the data. Citizens may not have the skills, expertise or the tools to do so. Often, external experts conduct the analysis, and they might be unaware of the historical context, culture and local conditions of the data. In that way, data may also construct and reinforce inequalities.

To foster inclusion, governments could diversify and increase the training of the teams who perform the analyses and write the algorithms so that they can interpret data within its larger historical and political context.

Using the data

Finally, governments are using the results of data analysis to inform public service provision. For example, data-driven visualizations, such as maps, might be used to make decisions about where to direct police officers. However, this might also lead to disproportionate surveillance of different groups.

Another issue is "function creep." Data might be collected for one purpose but is often eventually used for other purposes or by other government agencies, possibly leading to misuse of data and the reproduction of inequalities.

Digital literacy programs for both government professionals and the public can facilitate a better understanding of how data is visualized and used. It is important to highlight that these activities – collection, storage, analysis and use – are linked. Inequalities in the early stages may eventually lead to inequitable outcomes in the form of policies.

On the one hand, the invisibility of vulnerable groups in data collection can result in inequalities. Therefore, different groups should be included in the activities of the data process.

On the other hand, this can also be problematic because digital footprints can lead to oversurveillance of the same groups. The four activities are a repeated rather than linear process in which governments, citizens and third parties embrace inclusive data strategies. This means looking at what was created, including diverse voices and understanding the analysis, results and consequences of decisions. And it means consistently changing aspects of the process that do not foster inclusion.

Courtesy, The Conversation

9 bodies found as Spanish police search gutted flats

VALENCIA, 24 FEB

Firefighters and forensic authorities in Spain say nine bodies have been recovered from the ruins of a 14-floor apartment complex after fire tore through it in Valencia. Officials earlier said 10 had been killed, but later said one was missing. The cladding attached to the outside of the building as well as high winds are being blamed for the flames taking hold of the building in a matter of minutes. Officials have refused to answer questions on the cause of the fire. Three days of mourning will be observed. The fire is thought to have taken hold on the fourth floor of the larger of the two 14-storey blocks, engulfing it in minutes and then spreading to the adjacent one. Firefighters were unable to reach higher than the 12th floor as the flames burned at a terrifying pace through a layer of cladding, attached to the building under a very thin layer of aluminium. *—BBC News*

EC invests over €233 M in nature across Europe

BRUSSELS, 24 FEB

The European Commission is investing over EUR233 million in twelve new strategic projects across Europe under the LIFE programme to support the implementation of the EU's environmental and climate ambitions under the European Green Deal. These strategic projects are expected to mobilise substantial additional funds from other EU sources, including agricultural, structural, regional and research funds, as well as from national governments and private sector investment. The funding awarded to these twelve strategic projects will support Bulgaria, Czechia, Ireland, Spain, France, Italy, Lithuania, Austria, Poland and Finland to reach their national environmental and climate targets as they ramp up their contributions to the EU's green transition. The LIFE programme is the EU's funding instrument for the environment and climate action. *—ANI*

Nepal to make carrying chips must for Everest climbers

KATHMANDU, 24 FEB

Nepal will soon be making it mandatory for all climbers headed to Mount Everest to carry an electronic chip that would be helpful in rescue in case of any emergency at the world's highest peak. The government will soon be formulating a rule for making such a chip mandatory starting from Spring this year when the climbing season starts for Mt. Everest with the opening of the narrow window available to climb extremely high altitudes. Thousands of climbers from all over the world, including India and Nepal, are attracted to the 8,849 metres (29,032 feet) high Mt Everest, a.k.a. Sagarmatha in Nepali. While scores of them do reach the summit, some either lose their lives or are seriously injured during the ascent or descent. Since 1953, 300 persons have lost their lives, according to Nepal government data. *—PTI*

Pope Francis cancels audience because of a mild flu

VATICAN CITY, 24 FEB

Pope Francis has cancelled an audience scheduled for Saturday as a precaution after suffering a mild flu, the Vatican press office said in a short statement, without adding details. Francis was scheduled to meet with Rome deacons in the morning. The pontiff, 87, had already been forced to cancel some of his activities in November due to breathing problems. A scan at the time ruled out lung complications. Francis had a part of one lung removed when he was young and still living in his native Argentina. Last April, the pope spent three days at Rome's Gemelli hospital for what the Vatican said was bronchitis. He was discharged after receiving intravenous antibiotics. Francis also spent 10 days at the same hospital in July 2021 following intestinal surgery for a bowel narrowing. *—AP*

Western leaders arrive in Kiyv, as Ukraine marks 2 years of war

The leaders showed solidarity as Ukrainian forces are running low on ammo

ZKYIV, 24 FEB

Western leaders descended on Kyiv on Saturday to mark the second anniversary of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen travelled overnight to Kyiv by train along with Italian Premier Giorgia Meloni, Belgian Prime Minister Alexander De Croo and Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau.

They arrived shortly after a Russian drone attack struck a residential building in the southern city of Odesa, killing at least one person. Three women also sustained severe burns in the attack Friday evening on a residential building, regional Governor Oleh Kiper said on his social media account. Rescue services are still combing rubble looking for survivors.

The foreign leaders are in Ukraine to express solidarity as Ukrainian forces run low on ammunition and weaponry and Western aid hangs in the balance. "More than ever we stand firmly by Ukraine. Financially, economically, militarily, morally. Until the country is finally free," Von der Leyen, President of the European Commission, said in a post on X, after she arrived in Kyiv.

Italy, which holds the rotating presidency of the Group of Seven leading economies, announced that the group's heads of state and government will meet virtually on Saturday, with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy participating as well, and would adopt a joint statement on Ukraine.

Ukraine's Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba addresses a Security Council meeting on maintenance of peace and security of Ukraine *PHOTO: PTI*

- Under Meloni, Italy has been a strong supporter of Ukraine. Saturday's virtual meeting marks the first top-level G7 gathering of the Italian presidency; G7 heads of state and government are expected to meet in person in southern Puglia in June for their annual summit

Under Meloni, Italy has been a strong supporter of Ukraine. Saturday's virtual meeting marks the first top-level G7 gathering of the Italian presidency; G7 heads of state and government are expected to meet in person in southern Puglia in June for their annual summit. A somber mood hangs over Ukraine as the war against Russia enters its third year and Kyiv's troops face mounting challenges on the front line amid dwindling ammunition supplies and personnel challenges. Its troops recently withdrew from the strategic eastern city of Avdiivka, handing Moscow one of its biggest victories.

Earlier this month, President Volodymyr Zelenskyy fired top military commander Valerii Zaluzhnyi, replacing him with Col Gen Oleksandr Syrskyi, marking the most significant shakeup of top brass since the full-scale invasion.

Russia still controls roughly a quarter of the country after Ukraine failed to make any major breakthroughs with its summertime counteroffensive. Meanwhile, millions of Ukrainians continue to live in precarious circumstances in the crossfire of battles, and many others face constant struggles under Russian occupation. Most are waiting for a Ukrainian liberation that hasn't come. *—AP*

WILL WIN THE WAR: UKRAINE'S TOP DIPLOMAT

UNITED NATIONS, 24 FEB

Ukraine's foreign minister on Friday told sceptics who believe Ukraine can't win the war with Russia that they will be proven wrong: "Ukraine will win the war."

Dmytro Kuleba, speaking at the United Nations on the eve of the second anniversary of Russia's invasion, urged the world's nations to stand behind Ukraine. If they do, he said, victory will come "sooner rather than later".

Russia's UN Ambassador, Vassily Nebenzia, blamed the West for fomenting it, accused Ukraine of being a tool of Western geopolitical ambitions, and vowed that Russia's "special military operation" won't end until its goals are achieved.

Those goals — stated on 24 February, 2022, the day Russian troops crossed the border — include the de-militarization of Ukraine and ensuring its "neutral status". The UN General Assembly and the Security Council are marking the anniversary with ministerial meetings as President Volodymyr Zelenskyy pleads for more US military aid. *—AP*

ISRAEL-GAZA WAR

Israeli deals in West Bank are illegal: Blinken

CHARLESTON, 24 FEB

Antony Blinken *PHOTO: X/ SECBLINKEN*

- Blinken with the Argentine Foreign Minister Diana Mondino in Buenos Aires, said he was disappointed with Israel's latest plans for settlement expansion

At least 24 people were killed in Gaza's Deir el-Balah region when Israeli forces shelled a residence where displaced people were sheltering.

The new Israeli settlements in the West Bank are illegal and inconsistent with international law, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken has said, reversing a Trump-era policy.

Blinken, at a joint press conference with the Argentine Foreign Minister Diana Mondino in Buenos Aires, said he was disappointed with Israel's latest plans for settlement expansion.

"We have seen the reports, and I have to say we're disappointed in the announcement. It's been long-standing US policy under Republican and Democratic administrations alike that new settlements are counterproductive to reaching an enduring peace," Blinken said in response to a question.

"They're also inconsistent with international law. Our administration maintains a firm opposition to settlement expansion. And in our judgement, this only weakens -- it doesn't strengthen -- Israel's security," said the top American diplomat, a day after Israel's far-right Finance Minister Bezalel Smotrich indicated that more than 3,000 new residences would be added to settlements.

The statement comes as the Biden administration's latest shift away from the pro-Israel policies pursued by former president Donald Trump. The Trump administration reversed the US policy to declare that settlements did not violate international law. In 2019, under Trump, then-Secretary of State Mike Pompeo claimed that "the establishment of Israeli civilian settlements in the West Bank is not, per se, inconsistent with international law".

Blinken's statement was defended by the White House in Washington DC. *—PTI*

15 dead and dozens injured in China fire

NANJING, 24 FEB

According to Chinese local authorities 15 people have been killed and more than 40 injured after a fire ripped through an apartment building.

Footage shared on social medal showed flames and plumes of black smoke engulfing several floors of a skyscraper in Nanjing city. Officials suggested the blaze started on the first floor of the building, where electric bikes were being stored.

But the specific cause of the fire remained under investigation. The building is located in the Yuhuatai district of Nanjing, a city of more than eight million that lies about 162 miles (260km) north-west of Shanghai. Emergency service crews were first alerted to the blaze at 04:40 local time (20:40 GMT) on Friday, officials said on Saturday morning. 25 fire engines and 130 firefighters were sent to tackle to the blaze.

The building is located in the Yuhuatai district of Nanjing *PHOTO: X/ANSWERGCHOW*

By 06:00 (22:00 GMT), the fire had been extinguished, with the search and rescue operation ending around 14:00. Of the 44 injured people sent to hospital for treatment, one is in a critical condition and another seriously injured, the officials said.

At a press conference, Nanjing mayor Chen Zhichang offered his condolences and apologies to the victims' families. Aerial photos of the skyscraper shared on Friday after the fire had been extinguished showed some flats up the length of the building with blackened fronts.Fires and other deadly accidents often occur in China due to lax enforcement of safety standards. A recent spate of deadly fires across the country prompted President Xi Jinping to call last month for "deep reflection" and greater efforts to "curb the frequent occurrence of safety accidents". *—BBC News*

POLITICAL TURMOIL

Imran writes to IMF, seeks election audit before new loan

ISLAMABAD, 24 FEB

The former prime minister of Pakistan warned that the loan would lead to more poverty add to the country's burden *PHOTO: PTI*

Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) founder and former Prime Minister, Imran Khan, confirmed on Friday that he had sent a letter to the International Monetary Fund (IMF) demanding that it hold an audit of the election results before approving any new loan for Islamabad, The News International reported.

"The letter has been written to the IMF and will be dispatched today. If the country gets a loan in such a situation, then who will return it?" PTI leader told media during a hearing of the £190 million reference at Adiala Jail.

The former PM warned that the loan would lead to more poverty and add to the country's burden.

According to the News International report, Khan's update about the letter comes a day after PTI senator Ali Zafar announced that the party founder had decided to write to the global lender urging it to call for an audit of the 8 February election before it continues talks with Islamabad for a new loan programme.

However, the IMF, on Saturday, expressed willingness to work with the new Pakistani government, ignoring his demand, the news report stated. *—ANI*

PUTIN TORTURING HIM EVEN IN DEATH: NAVALNY WIDOW

MOSCOW, 24 FEB

The widow of Russian opposition leader Alexei Navalny accused President Vladimir Putin of mocking Christianity by trying to force his mother to agree to a secret funeral after his death in a penal colony. Yulia Navalnaya said in a video released Saturday that Navalny's mother, who wants her son's body returned to her, is being "literally tortured" by authorities who had threatened to bury Navalny in the Arctic prison. They suggested to his mother that she does not have much time to make a decision because the body is decomposing, Navalnaya said. "Give us the body of my husband," Navalnaya said. "You tortured him alive, and now you keep torturing him dead. You mock the remains of the dead." Navalny, 47, Russia's most well-known opposition politician, unexpectedly died on 16 February in the penal colony, prompting hundreds of Russians across the country to stream to impromptu memorials with flowers and candles. *—AP*

HOUTHIS ATTACK UK-OWNED SHIP AGAIN IN RED SEA: US

CAIRO, 24 FEB

An attack by Yemeni Houthi rebels on a Belize-flagged ship earlier this month caused an 18-mile oil slick, the US military said on Saturday. It also warned of the danger of a spill from the vessel's cargo of fertilizer. The Rubymar, a British-registered, Lebanese-operated cargo vessel, was attacked on February 18 while sailing through the Bab el-Mandeb Strait that connects the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden, US said.

The missile attack forced the crew to abandon the vessel, which had been on its way to Bulgaria after leaving Khorfakkan in the United Arab Emirates. It was transporting more than 41,000 tons of fertiliser, CENTCOM said. The vessel suffered significant damage, which led to the slick, said the CENTCOM statement, warning that the ship's cargo "could spill into the Red Sea and worsen this environmental disaster".

"The Houthis continue to demonstrate disregard for the regional impact of their indiscriminate attacks, threatening the fishing industry, coastal communities, and imports of food supplies," it said. *—AP*

X shutdown continues for 7th day in Pakistan

ISLAMABAD, 24 FEB

After almost a week, the popular social media platform 'X' is still inaccessible to Pakistanis and the caretaker government has yet to disclose the reason behind the prolonged disruption, Geo News reported.

According to the report, the shutdown that began last Saturday resulted in users across the country being unable to share information. Caretaker Minister for Information and Technology Dr Umar Saif was not immediately available for a comment and the Pakistan Tele communication Authority (PTA) has yet to issue a statement on the matter. "User reports indicate possible problems at X," said website tracker Downdetector.com, Geo News reported. According to the report, despite being the country among the top internet users globally, Pakistan struggles with internet availability, ranking low compared to its peers, while reportedly authorities intermittently disrupt access to social media platforms. Ahead of the 8 February general elections, users were unable to access several social media sites, for which authorities concerned blamed an error. *—ANI*

CITES 'SUFFICIENT' EVIDENCE

Indian mission raises Jaahnavi Kandula case

WASHINGTON, 24 FEB

India's consulate in Seattle has raised with authorities the case of Indian student Jaahnavi Kandula after the prosecution attorney said an overspeeding Seattle police officer who struck and killed her while responding to a drug overdose call will not face any criminal charges citing lack of "sufficient" evidence.

Kandula, 23, from Andhra Pradesh, was struck by a police vehicle driven by Officer Kevin Dave when she was crossing a street in Seattle on 23 January last year. He was driving 74 mph (more than 119 km/h) on the way to a report of a drug overdose call. Kandula was thrown 100 feet when she was struck by the speeding police patrol vehicle.

Jaahnavi Kandula, 23, from Andhra Pradesh, was struck by a police vehicle driven by Officer Kevin Dave *PHOTO: PTI*

In bodycam footage released by the Seattle Police Department, Officer Daniel Auderer laughed about the deadly crash and dismissed any implication Dave might be at fault or that a criminal investigation was necessary.

On Wednesday, the King County Prosecutor's Office said they would not move forward with criminal charges against Dave due to a lack of evidence to prove a criminal case beyond a reasonable doubt.

- On Wednesday, the King County Prosecutor's Office said they would not move forward with criminal charges against Dave due to a lack of evidence to prove a criminal case beyond a reasonable doubt

India's consulate in Seattle also said it was monitoring the progress in the case and will extend all possible support in ensuring justice for Kandula and her family.

"On the recently released investigation report of the King County Prosecution Attorney on the unfortunate death of Jaahnavi Kandula, the Consulate has been in regular touch with the designated family representatives and will continue to extend all possible support in ensuring justice for Jaahnavi and her family," the mission said in a post on X. "We have also raised the matter strongly with local authorities, including Seattle Police for appropriate redress. The case has now been referred to the Seattle City Attorney's office for review," the post said on Friday. Kandula's family in a statement following the announcement said: "We are shocked and disappointed that the King County Prosecutor's office has failed to criminally charge the Seattle police officer whose reckless behaviour killed Jaahnavi Kandula." *—PTI*

Taiwanese for keeping status quo with China

TAIPEI, 24 FEB

More than 80 per cent of Taiwanese people want to maintain the status quo with China, with those preferring to keep Taiwan's current status indefinitely rising sharply, while those who want independence have been dropping since 2020, according to the results of a survey released on Friday, Central News Agency Taiwan reported.

In the survey titled "Changes in the Unification-Independence Stances of Taiwanese," National Chengchi University's Election Study Centre, which has tracked the annual change in Taiwanese residents' stance on the issue from 1994-2023, said it saw increasing support for the continuation of cross-strait status quo.

The three most preferred choices in 2023 were: "maintain the status quo indefinitely" (33.2 per cent), "maintain the status quo, decide at a later date" (27.9 per cent) and "maintain the status quo, move toward independence" (21.5 per cent), according to the Centre. Added together, those three categories of people who either want to maintain the status quo for now or indefinitely accounted for 82.6 per cent of the total, Central News Agency Taiwan reported.

The least preferred option was "unification as soon as possible," which had never exceeded 5 per cent since the survey has been conducted and stood at only 1.2 per cent in 2023, according to the findings. That category of people who want to "maintain the status quo, move toward unification," has dropped from the third highest percentage overall, or 15.6 per cent, in 1994, to 6.2 per cent in 2023. *—ANI*

Bihar, SIDBI to collab on enhancing startup ecosystem

PATNA, 24 FEB

Bihar government and the Small Industries Development Bank of India (SIDBI) have signed an MoU in a bid to boost the startup ecosystem in the eastern state, officials said.The initiative is aimed at creating a conducive environment for startups and transforming Bihar into a startup hub, a SIDBI release said."The Bihar Startup Fund Trust (BSFT) and SIDBI entered into an MoU to administer the Rs 50-crore Bihar Startup Scale-up Financing Fund' (BSSFF)," it said.The BSFT is the nodal agency constituted by the Industries Department for implementation of the Bihar Startup Policy."Under the policy, the state government has set up the BSFT with an initial corpus of Rs 500 crore. Out of this, BSSFF has been established with an initial corpus of Rs 50 crore for scale-up funding support to startups," the release said. *—PTI*

Pune Gas install LPG project for Taj group hotel in Tawang

MUMBAI, 24 FEB

Pune Gas on Saturday said it has completed a project involving the installation of an LPG gas bank at a Taj Group hotel in Arunachal Pradesh.The company said the gas bank set up at Taj Vivanta in Tawang is part of decarbonisation in the hospitality industry. Tawang is dotted with a large number of hotels and restaurants traditionally relying on fuels like LDO, furnace fuel, and coal, among others, the company said. Recognizing the importance of preserving the biodiversity of this nature-centric location, Taj Vivanta decided to transition to LPG fuel, it said. The installation of the LPG gas bank at Taj Vivanta not only reduces the hotel's carbon footprint but also enhances safety and reliability in kitchen operations, the company said. *—PTI*

Adani hints at future tie ups with Uber

NEW DELHI, 24 FEB

Billionaire Gautam Adani on Saturday met Uber CEO Dara Khosrowshahi, who is currently on a visit to India, and hinted at possible future collaborations between his conglomerate and the ride-hailing app. Taking to X, both business leaders appreciated their conversation on the Indian growth story and their vision for the subcontinent."Absolutely captivating chat with @dkhos, CEO of @Uber. His vision for Uber's expansion in India is truly inspiring, especially his commitment to uplifting Indian drivers and their dignity. Excited for future collaborations with Dara and his team! #UberIndia," Adani said in a post on X. Uber CEO said he met the head of ports-to-energy conglomerate over breakfast for an "absolutely terrific conversation". He also highlighted the mobility service provider's commitment to accelerate EV transition in India.Adani also posted pictures of the meeting but the two did not say where the meeting took place. The pictures seem to suggest the meeting took place at Adani group's headquarters in Ahmedabad. ber CEO arrived in India earlier this week. During this time, the ride-sharing platform Uber on February 22 signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with Open Network for Digital Commerce (ONDC) to explore an integration with the network to expand the range of mobility offerings on the Uber app. The partnership with ONDC, a non-profit private organisation founded by the Indian government's Department for Promotion of Industry and Internal Trade, is expected to advance Uber's objective of providing all Indians with dependable, safe, and reasonably priced rides. Adani group is investing USD 100 billion across businesses, including in energy transition, over the next decade.It is also investing in battery swapping and EV charging stations. *—PTI*

Around 65,000 functional PACS to be computerised by Aug: HM

Shah also said that model bylaws are implemented by all states, UTs

NEW DELHI, 24 FEB

By August 2024, all PACS will be computerised, Union Minister Amit Shah said *PHOTO: PTI*

Union Cooperation Minister Amit Shah on Saturday said around 65,000 functional Primary Agricultural Cooperative Societies (PACS) will be computerised by August this year to improve their efficiency. The computerisation work has already been completed so far in 18,000 PACS. Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Saturday inaugurated the project for computerisation in 18,000 PACS across the country.

"I am happy that out of 65,000 PACs, computerisation of 18,000 PACs has been completed. Before elections, 30,000 PACs will be done," Shah said, while addressing a conference.

By August 2024, all PACS will be computerised, the Union minister said.

In June last year, the Cabinet Committee on Economic Affairs (CCEA) approved the computerisation of these PACS with an outlay of Rs 2,516 crore.

The objective is to increase the efficiency of PACS, bringing transparency and accountability in their operations.

This will also help in facilitating PACS to diversify their business and undertake multiple activities/services.

Shah also highlighted that the model bylaws have been implemented by all states and Union Territories, irrespective of political parties.

With the adoption of these model bylaws, he said PACs can now diversify into new areas.

Prime Minister formally launched 'World's Largest Grain Storage Plan in Cooperative Sector' with the inauguration of 11 godowns set up by PACS across 11 states.

Modi also laid the foundation stone for the construction of godowns in an additional 500 PACS across the country.

On this initiative, Shah said farmers would be able to store 100 per cent of their production with the creation of new capacities.

Storage capacity in other countries is higher than production except for India, he added.

Food Corporation of India (FCI) has been bearing the responsibility of storage to date.

Godowns set up in PACS will provide all modernised tools for farmers, Shah said. The cooperation minister said more than 50 initiatives have been taken in just 35 months following the creation of the cooperation ministry.

—PTI

- Objective is to increase the efficiency of PACS, bringing transparency and accountability in operations.With the adoption of these model bylaws, PACs can now diversify into new areas

DPIIT SECY ON MANDATES

Start-ups will play a very important role through their innovation in the journey of energy transition *PHOTO: PTI*

'Will not accept unjust carbon emission mandates'

NEW DELHI, 24 FEB

India will not accept any unjustified mandate on carbon emissions but will deliver more than the commitment it makes, a senior government official said on Friday.

While speaking at the Aavaana-Startup India ClimateTech Challenge event, Department for Promotion of Industry and Internal Trade (DPIIT) Secretary Rajesh Kumar Singh said India's mandate is to become net zero by 2070.

"We have accepted a stretched-out kind of goal because India believes we are not historically responsible for carbon emissions, even less in per capita terms, but the vision of the Hon'ble PM has always been that we will not accept unjustified mandates but we will deliver much more than we have promised," he said. Singh said India has already built the world's 4th largest renewable energy capacity of 180 gigawatts.

"We are well ahead of our SDG (Sustainable Development Goals) goals," he said.

He said that as India moves towards a greener future, start-ups will play a very important role through their innovation in the journey of energy transition.

Avaana Capital declared three winners of the challenge that were selected by a panel of jury chaired by G20 Sherpa Amitabh Kant.

Avaana Climate and Sustainability Fund's founding partner Anjali Bansal said that India has a pivotal role to play both in terms of mitigation of carbon GHG as well as adaptation and technology will play an important role in that transition.

HSBC India, MD, Chief of Staff and Head of Strategy, Ranjan Bhattacharya said while solving sustainability problems, enterprises should not create problems on the other side.

He cited an example of a wooden toothbrush wrapped in paper being given to hotel guests which addresses the issue of plastic waste but on the other side, it may lead to cutting of trees and deforestation.

—PTI

Shares in firm rose more than 4% *PHOTO: PTI*

AI chip firm Nvidia valued at $2 T

CALIFORNIA, 24 FEB

Nvidia's market value has touched $2tn (£1.58tn), a new milestone in the chipmaker's rapid ascent into the ranks of the world's most valuable companies.

Shares in the Silicon Valley firm rose more than 4% in morning trade on Friday before dropping back a bit.Gains extended a jump after the company's blockbuster earnings report this week.The company is benefiting from advances in artificial intelligence (AI), which have powered demand for its chips.

Turnover at the firm more than doubled last year to more than $60bn, and boss Jensen Huang told investors this week that demand was "surging" around the world. Nvidia president Jensen Huang told investors demand for chips was surging.The company, which became worth $1tn, now ranks as the world's fourth most valuable publicly traded company, behind Microsoft, Apple and Saudi Aramco. After shares retreated from their early Friday highs, the firm's market value ended the day just below $2 trillion.

On Thursday, buyers snapping up shares pushed its value up by $277bn, Wall Street's largest one-day gain in history. *—BBC News*

Zurich Insurance to acquire 70% stake in Kotak Mahindra

NEW DELHI, 24 FEB

Zurich Insurance serves people and businesses in more than 200 countries and territories *PHOTO: X*

Kotak Mahindra Bank on Friday said Zurich Insurance Company has agreed to pick up 70 per cent stake instead of 51 per cent in its general insurance arm.

In November, Zurich Insurance Company had announced plans to acquire a 51 per cent stake in Kotak Mahindra General through a combination of capital infusion and share purchase, followed by a subsequent acquisition of an additional stake of 19 per cent within a period of three years from the initial acquisition.

"The parties to the aforesaid transaction, viz., the bank, Zurich, and Kotak General have mutually agreed that Zurich will acquire 70 per cent stake in Kotak General by way of a combination of primary and secondary acquisitions in a single tranche, for a total consideration of approximately Rs 5,560 crore, instead of the proposal announced in our earlier disclosure," the bank said in a regulatory filing.

The other terms of the transaction remain unchanged, it said.

The proposed 70 per cent acquisition would be subject to fulfilment of customary conditions precedent, including the receipt of regulatory approvals from the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) and the Insurance Regulatory and Development Authority of India (Irdai), it said.

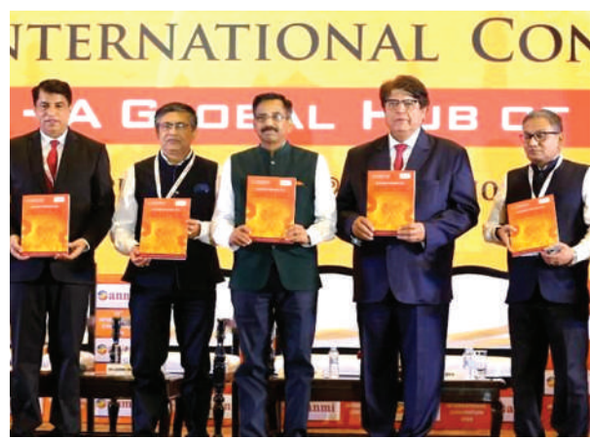
As per the current regulatory guidelines, a foreign entity can own up to 74 per cent in an insurance venture in India.

Earlier this month, the Competition Commission of India (CCI) approved acquisition of 70 per cent stake by Zurich Insurance Company Ltd in Kotak Mahindra General Insurance Company Ltd.

The acquirer is a wholly owned subsidiary of Zurich Insurance Group Ltd (Zurich Insurance Group).

It is a leading multi-line insurer serving people and businesses in more than 200 countries and territories.

—PTI



Renowned experts in the finance sector provided valuable insights into the future of Indian capital markets *PHOTO: ANI*

TRAI seeks view on enabling virtual ops

NEW DELHI, 24 FEB

Telecom regulator Trai invited views on enabling virtual network operators to tie up with more than one telecom operators for providing wireless and wireline services.

At present, a virtual network operator (VNO) is allowed to partner with only one telecom operator for providing services which need numbering and unique identity of the customers like mobile connection etc.Telecom Regulatory Authority of India has issued a consultation paper on "Connectivity to Access Service VNOs From More Than one NSO (network service operator)" following reference made by the Department of Telecom based on representation made by VNOs.

"The Authority is issuing this consultation paper for soliciting comments of stakeholders on the issues related to connectivity to access service VNOs from more than one NSO," Trai said in the paper.VNOs have requested that their peers who intend to provide wireline services only may be required to take connectivity from more than one telecom operator because in some cases partner telecom operators may not have services in some areas.

—PTI

SEBI using AI for investigations, says official

NEW DELHI, 24 FEB

SEBI has been taking action against violators as well as measures to enhance transparency and curb misdoings *PHOTO: PTI*

SEBI is using Artificial Intelligence (AI) for investigations, its Whole Time Member Kamlesh Chandra Varshney said on Saturday and emphasised that entities should keep track of technological developments.

Against the backdrop of instances of manipulations in the stock market, he said the message is that abiding with the law will be more beneficial and violations will cause problems.

In response to a question by PTI on whether Sebi is using AI, Varshney said, "we are using Al for investigations... and also using for a lot of things".

He was speaking on the sidelines of the 13th international convention of the Association of National Exchanges Members of India (ANMI) in the national capital.

As long as the market is transparent and no manipulation is happening, that is fine with the regulator, he noted.

The Securities and Exchange Board of India (Sebi) has been taking action against violators as well as measures to enhance transparency and curb misdoings.

—PTI

SEBI: Market must expand by 12% to align with Viksit Bharat aims

NEW DELHI, 24 FEB

Association of National Exchanges Members of India (ANMI) recently wrapped up its 13th International Convention, held in New Delhi, on Saturday.

According to a press release, the event, themed "Bharat: A Global Hub of Opportunities," brought together over 900 trading members from leading Indian stock exchanges, regulatory authorities, and industry leaders to deliberate on strategies to expand India's capital market.

The convention featured insightful sessions focusing on Mega Trends in the Indian Capital Markets for the Next Decade, India's Economic Ascent, and Technology Enablers in Capital Markets.

Renowned experts in the finance sector engaged in motivating discussions and provided valuable insights into the future of Indian capital markets.

A key highlight of the event was the presence of KamleshVarshney, Whole Time Member, SEBI, who emphasized the importance of reforms, innovation, and investor trust in achieving targeted capital market growth.

Varshney highlighted SEBI's initiatives, including the development of a cyber-security framework, and encouraged brokers to implement these measures to enhance investor confidence.

He stressed that the Capital Market must expand by more than 12 per cent to align with the objectives of Viksit Bharat.

Key factors for achieving this targeted growth include a strong emphasis on reforms, innovation, leveraging technology, and fostering investor trust.

Varshney highlighted SEBI's proactive measures in enhancing cybersecurity by developing a comprehensive framework, which has been shared with the industry.

Ashish Chauhan, MD and CEO of NSE, also delivered a compelling speech, emphasizing the role of stockbrokers as catalysts for growth and the importance of investing in NIFTY for wealth creation and the future growth of India.

Highlighting the pivotal role of stockbrokers, Chauhan identified them as catalysts for the envisioned growth.

He asserted that achieving a market cap of USD 50 trillion in the next two decades is contingent on the emergence and success of tech-driven startups, which are anticipated to be the primary drivers of wealth creation in India. Top of Form

He set a target to increase the number of registered depositaries with unique PAN numbers to 100 per cent to expand market participation.

Hemant Kakkar, Convenor and Chairman of ANMI, echoed Dr Mehta's sentiments, emphasizing the convention's focus on exploring ways to boost India's global economic status through capital market initiatives.

—ANI

SAFETY FIRST

Seat belts must in passenger buses, heavy vehicles

NEW DELHI, 24 FEB

The decision comes amid the increasing number of accidents resulting in loss of lives *PHOTO: X*

International Road Federation (IRF) -- a global road safety body -- has urged the Ministry of Road Transport and Highways (MoRTH) to make the use of seat belts mandatory in all heavy vehicles, including passenger buses and school buses, to minimise casualties and injuries in road accidents. IRF President Emeritus K KKapila in a letter to MoRTH said there is an urgent need to provide seats belts in buses, which need to be made mandatory.

"There have been heart-wrenching passenger bus accidents resulting in loss of innocent lives. Many of them would have been saved, had they been wearing seat belts," he said.

Kapila pointed out that according to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration's 2021 data, only 14 individuals lost their lives in bus accidents in the USA.

Similarly, based on the analysis of the accident propensity of Chinese bus drivers in 2022, China reported 215 fatalities.

He pointed out that both developing and developed countries have achieved remarkable outcomes due to stringent safety standards for public transport like buses.

"The contrasting and alarming data in India suggests a lacuna in mandating safety standards in buses, jeopardising the lives of school children, the poor, and the low income strata of the society," Kapila added.

—PTI

Bashir wrecks India in Ranchi

4th test: India reach 219/7 at stumps, trail England by 134 runs

RANCHI, 24 FEB

Young off-spinner Shoaib Bashir scythed through the Indian line-up with an impressive four-wicket haul that left the hosts stuttering at 219 for seven on day two of the fourth Test here on Saturday.

The 20-year-old Bashir, playing only his second Test, got rid of Shubman Gill (38), Rajat Patidar (17), Ravindra Jadeja (12) on a pitch that has uneven bounce and cracks to rattle the Indian top and middle order. He returned after the tea break in his marathon 31-over spell across two sessions to clean up in-form Yashasvi Jaiswal (73) with a ball that skid through the defence of the left-hander. With intermittent wickets pegging India back, they were forced to play a catch-up game and are still trailing by 134 runs.

If it was not for a combative partnership between Dhruv Jurel (30 batting) and Kuldeep Yadav (17), India would have struggled to cross even 200-run mark. They had joined forces when the scorecard read 177 for seven. The two batters played late and did not commit early into their shots, a ply that worked well in their unbeaten 42-run stand.

This was after England's first innings folded for 353 after starting the day at 302 for seven. The total could have been bigger if Ollie Robinson (58) had not attempted an audacious reverse sweep off Ravindra Jadeja. The 22-year-old Jaiswal yet again produced a confident knock. He now has scored 618 runs with an average of 103 in this series. He looked for another big one before being done in by low bounce.

Left-arm spinner Tom Hartley returned with figures of 2/47 that included the crucial breakthrough of Sarfaraz Khan (14) who had a frustrating stay. He also survived a run-out. Jaiswal showed why he is India's latest run machine when he overcame some anxious moments to post his fourth fifty-plus score in this series.

From a watchful start, India No 3 Gill accelerated post-lunch break, taking on Anderson with two elegant boundaries -- one flick off the pads, and a punch straight back down the ground. *—PTI*

England's wicket-keeper Ben Foakes takes the catch of India's batter Rohit Sharma during the second day of the fourth Test cricket match in Ranchi *PHOTO: PTI*

UEFA WOMEN'S NATIONS LEAGUE

France scored two first-half goals and held on to beat Germany 2-1 *PHOTO: X/ FRENCH TEAM/ SPAIN*

SPAIN SET UP FINAL CLASH WITH FRANCE

LYON, 24 FEB

France scored two first-half goals and held on to beat Germany 2-1 and reach the final of the inaugural Women's Nations League on Friday.

Coach Hervé Renard's side will play Spain away in the final next Wednesday after the Women's World Cup winner beat the Netherlands 3-0 in the other semifinal. "Congratulations to the girls, they have been remarkable, but only half the journey is complete," Renard said. "Spain are the best team in the world at the moment so it's a big challenge. But we have everything to win."

Forward Kadidiatou Diani put France ahead in the 41st minute when she volleyed home after Germany's defense failed to properly clear a free kick. The home side moved further ahead in first half injury time when defender Sakina Karchaoui struck a powerful penalty past goalkeeper Merle Frohms, after Selma Bacha was fouled.

France was without injured center half Wendie Renard but was untroubled until midfielder Sara Däbritz went close with a powerful shot from 25 meters in the 75th as the visitors cranked up the pressure.

Soon after, Amandine Henry handled the ball on a cross, and a penalty was awarded following a video review. Right back Giulia Gwinn rifled the spot kick into the roof of the net in the 82nd to give Germany hope in front of 30,000 fans at Lyon's Groupama Stadium. Spain's win qualified it for the Paris Olympics, where Les Bleues are already qualified as a host country. *—AP*

Indian cyclists add 2 gold, 1 silver, 1 bronze to kitty

NEW DELHI, 24 FEB

The third day of the Asian Track Cycling Championships saw an impressive performance from Indian cyclists across various categories. Held at the cycling track in New Delhi, the event witnessed exceptional displays of skill and determination from the athletes. In the Junior Women's category, Sarita Kumari showcased her talent by securing the Bronze medal in the Final race with a remarkable timing of 36.966s. Kumari had already displayed her prowess in the qualifying round, clocking in at 36.912s, which secured her a spot in the finals, where she continued to excel. Meanwhile, Meenakshi demonstrated her strength and determination by setting a new National Record in the Women's Senior Individual Pursuit event. Arshad Shaikh clinched the Gold medal in the 1km Time Trial C2 category. Para Women Cyclist Jyoti Gaderiya also added the Gold medal in the 500m Time trial of the C2 category with 52.450s. *—ANI*

India bag 4 medals, confirm 10 more in Asia Cup Archery

BAGHDAD, 24 FEB

Indian archers bagged four medals including three gold in the compound section as they faced little competition in the Asia Cup Leg 1 on Saturday. The archers have also confirmed 10 more medals including at least three gold on Sunday. The men's, women's and mixed compound teams won the three gold medals, defeating their Iranian counterparts in all the three finals. The women's team won 223-229, the men's side triumphed 232-229 and the mixed team emerged 159-157 winners. Reigning world champion Aditi Swami secured a bronze medal in compound women's individual with a 148-145 win over teammate Priya Gurjar. The recurve mixed and men's teams will take on their opponents from Bangladesh while the women's team will face Uzbekistan in their respective gold medal matches on Sunday. In individual section, it will be a battle between veteran three-time Olympian Deepika Kumari and the upcoming Simranjeet Kaur for the recurve women's title. *—PTI*

PHOTO: X

ICC suspends Hasaranga for 2 int'l matches

DUBAI, 24 FEB

The International Cricket Council (ICC) on Saturday announced that Sri Lanka's T20I captain Wanindu Hasaranga has been suspended for two international matches after his accumulated demerit points reached five within a 24-month period following his latest breach of the ICC Code of Conduct, for which he received a 50 per cent fine and three demerit points. "Hasaranga was found guilty of breaching article 2.13 of the ICC Code of Conduct for Players and Player Support Personnel, which relates to "Personal abuse of a Player, Player Support Personnel, Umpire or Match Referee during an International Match," ICC said in an official statement. Hasaranga's five demerit points convert to two suspension points. As two suspension points equate to a ban from one Test or two ODIs or T20Is, whatever comes first for the player or player support personnel, Hasaranga stands suspended from Sri Lanka's first two T20Is against Bangladesh next month. The incident occurred after the match when Hasaranga confronted umpire Lyndon Hanibal to chastise him for a ruling. Afghanistan player Rahmanullah Gurbaz has also been penalised. He has been fined 15 per cent of his match fee for breaching Level 1 of the ICC Code of Conduct in the same match. "Rahmanullah was found to have breached article 2.4 of the Code, which relates to "Disobeying an Umpire's instruction during an International Match," a statement from ICC read. *—ANI*

Ranji Trophy: Nair shines as Vidarbha post 460 vs K'taka

NAGPUR, 24 FEB

Karun Nair's 90-run knock was the highlight of the day as Vidarbha posted 460 all out in their Ranji Trophy quarterfinal against Karnataka here on Saturday.

Resuming the second day on 261 for three after Atharva Taide's century and Yash Rathod's 93, Vidarbha rode on Nair's innings to post a big first-innings total. In reply, Karnataka were 98 for two at stumps with Ravikumar Samarth and Nikin Jose batting on 43 and 20, respectively. The visitors trailed by 362 runs.

Vidarbha lost Akshay Wadkar (16) for the addition of just 23 runs to their overnight total, and were 319 for five, when Mohit Kale (16) was dismissed by Hardik Raj. Nair and Aditya Sarwate (26) added 55 runs before the latter was dismissed by Vidwath Kaverappa, who picked up four wickets in all while giving away 99 runs.

Kaverappa's victims also included the all-important wicket of Nair, who fell short of his 19th first-class hundred by 10 runs. Karnataka began their response on a jittery note, losing skipper Mayank Agarwal (0) to Aditya Thakare with just four runs on the board. A 59-run partnership between opener Ravikumar Samarth (43 batting) and KV Aneesh (34) steadied the innings but Yash Thakur got rid of Aneesh with the score reading 63. *—PTI*

SACHIN MEETS J&K PARA TEAM CAPTAIN

Jammu and Kashmir Para cricket team captain Amir Hussain Lone is a 'real hero and an inspiration', legendary Sachin Tendulkar said on Saturday after he met the differently-abled sportsman during his trip to the valley *PHOTO: X/SACHI TENDULKAR/ SCREENGRAB*

ISL: Odisha, MB play out goalless draw

BHUBANESWAR, 24 FEB

- They were unable to make the most of the opportunity at home against an upbeat Mohun Bagan Super Giant, who extended their unbeaten streak to five games under Antonio Lopez Habas in the ISL

Odisha FC and Mohun Bagan Super Giant played out a goalless draw in the Indian Super League here on Saturday.

With competitors elevating their performance levels lately, the pressure has been built on the Juggernauts to not drop points in their pursuit of the top spot of the points table. Mumbai City FC equalled them in points last night with their win over Chennaiyin FC, as only a superior goal difference keeping the Sergio Lobera-coached side ahead in the race.

However, they were unable to make the most of the opportunity at home against an upbeat Mohun Bagan Super Giant, who extended their unbeaten streak to five games under Antonio Lopez Habas in the ISL. Contrary to what the scoreline suggests, it was an end-to-end contest that produced umpteen opportunities for either sides to break the deadlock.

A total of nine shots were taken out of which six were on target, combined for both teams, with Isak Vanlalruatfela and Albanian striker Armando Sadiku leading the charge for their respective teams. Isak, in particular, was a menace for the Mariners, coming close to bagging the first goal of the night for Odisha FC multiple times in the opening half. He forced a mistake off Anwar Ali around the 20th minute mark and targeted the top right corner but the shot failed to trouble Vishal Kaith.

He had a duel with Kaith in the third minute too, making a dazzling run on the left flank before shooting his shot at the goalkeeper who held his composure to make a critical save by staying in his line. *—PTI*

Players of Odisha FC and Mohun Bagan Super Giant vie for the ball during an Indian Super League (ISL) 2023-24 season football match, at the Kalinga Stadium, in Mumbai on Saturday *PHOTO: PTI*

PCB looking to appoint foreign coaches, support staff for T20 WC

LAHORE, 24 FEB

The Pakistan Cricket Board (PCB), led by new chairman Mohsin Naqvi, is looking to appoint foreign coaches and support staff to guide the national team through to the T20 World Cup scheduled to be held in USA and West Indies in June.

"The new Chairman, Mohsin Naqvi is keen to look at the available coaching options for Pakistan and is more inclined to appoint foreign coaches and support staff," a well-informed source in the board said.

"Naqvi has already asked chief selector, Wahab Riaz to speak to some of the available options and short list candidates as he is aware foreign coaches might be reluctant to join the Pakistan team because of the way Mickey Arthur, Grant Bradburn and Andrew Puttick were removed from their positions after the World Cup and their contracts cut short."

Veteran administrator Naqvi was appointed as PCB chief for a three-year term early this month. The source said Wahab, who is very close to the Chairman having worked as his advisor on sports in the Punjab government, has been tasked with having initial discussions with prospective candidates.

PCB recently released Muhammad Hafeez as team director though the former Test captain was assured he would get a three-year contract by the board's previous chairman, Zaka Ashraf.

The future of the other coaches, including Umar Gul and Saeed Ajmal, is also uncertain as they were brought in by Hafeez.

The source said Naqvi was also not convinced that Shaheen Shah Afridi was the best choice to lead the T20 outfit and ranked Muhammad Rizwan as a better option to lead in both white ball formats. "Shaheen's performance as captain in the Pakistan Super League is under scrutiny no doubt about that," the source said. *—PTI*

K'taka register 2-2 draw against Mizoram

YUPIA, 24 FEB

Defending champions Karnataka came from two goals down to draw 2-2 against Mizoram in Group B of the 77th National Football Championship for Santosh Trophy Final Round at the Golden Jubilee Stadium in Yupia on Saturday.

Mizoram was seemingly running away with the three points after goals from MS Dawngliana and MC Malsawmzuala had put them in a commanding position. But Karnataka showed the champion spirit to score twice in quick succession in the second half through Prabin Tigga and Vishal R to rescue a point. This was Karnataka's second consecutive draw after a 1-1 result against Delhi on Thursday. Mizoram were beaten 1-3 by Maharashtra in the opener and have now opened their tally, as per a press release from All India Football Federation (AIFF).

Mizoram took the lead after a sensational move between Malsawmzuala and Dawngliana. With a superb behind-the-back flick, the former picked out the latter, who lashed a parabolic shot into the goal with a cleanly-hit half-volley.

The 2014 champions could have extended their lead in the 34th minute had R Malsawmtluanga not flashed his first-time shot wide. In the very next minute, however, he was involved at the other end, making a crucial goal-line block to deny D Sheltohn Paul from equalising.

Mizoram was off the blocks quicker again in the second half and doubled their lead after another brilliant build-up. Winger Lalthankima got the better of Tigga with some exquisite footwork before cutting it in from the by-line. Arriving at the end of the cross was Malsawmzuala, who drove it into the bottom corner with a first-time shot.

But Karnataka was not done and dusted. Ravi Babu Raju's side struck twice in two minutes to turn the game on its head. *—ANI*

DIKSHA 4TH, PRANAVI 13TH IN MOROCCO AFTER 2ND ROUND

RABAT, 24 FEB

Diksha Dagar placed herself for a good finish as she moved into the tied fourth spot at the end of the second round of the Lalla Meryem Cup on the Ladies European Tour here on Saturday. Diksha, third on the LET Order of Merit in 2023, shot 2-under 73 and moved to 4-under 142 total. Pranavi Urs, playing her first full season on the LET, seemed set for a high position after the second hole as she was 3-under through the front nine and 5-under for the event at that stage. Pranavi then dropped a double bogey on the 14th and a bogey on the 17th to drop back to even par 73. At 2-under total, she was tied 13th at the Par-73 Royal Golf Dar Es Salam course. Mexico's Maria Fassi continued to dominate after producing a strong second round of 69 (-4). Fassi has held the lead since the start of the tournament carding a round of 65 (-8). *—PTI*

SPEED, POWER, PRECISION

Red Bull lay down marker; can they be stopped

BAHRAIN, 24 FEB

The 2024 Formula 1 season looks poised to start the way the last one finished - with Max Verstappen and Red Bull out of reach at the front of the field.

That seems to have been the lesson from three days of pre-season testing in Bahrain this week. Verstappen and his spectacular new RB20 car looked every bit as imperious as the Dutchman did in its record-breaking predecessor last year. Of course, it is, as the old F1 adage goes, only testing. The times don't mean anything because it's too difficult to make judgements as result of the number of variables involved - fuel loads, track condition, tyres and so on.

Well, yes, up to a point. As ever, the headline lists of lap times threw up some obvious inconsistencies and impossibilities. Zhou Guanyu's Sauber, for example, ended the final day of the test with the third fastest time. If the Chinese qualifies there in Bahrain next Friday for Saturday's season-opening race, he would be as surprised as anyone else.

But just as this time last year, there was little doubt about the superiority of Verstappen and Red Bull. Even the list of times on the final day more or less gave that away, if you looked just below the surface.

If the Chinese qualifies there in Bahrain next Friday season-opening race, he would be as surprised as anyone else *PHOTO: X/RED BULL*

Charles Leclerc was fastest in his Ferrari, closely followed by George Russell's Mercedes, with Verstappen fourth. But Leclerc, Russell - and Zhou, for that matter - all used the softer C4 tyres to beat Verstappen's time, while he was on the slower, harder C3s. The margin by which Leclerc beat Verstappen was smaller than the performance offset between the two types of tyre. And comparing times set on the C3s, Verstappen was fastest - and you can bet your house on the fact that he was not running a qualifying-style light fuel load.

Not only that, but none of Verstappen's rivals were bothering to engage in the usual testing cliches, about how it's impossible to judge where everyone is. *—BBC News*